

**SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES  
IN NORTH CAROLINA UNITED METHODISM**

**A SOCIAL PROFILE AND ANALYSIS**

by

**Jackson W. Carroll**

**THE J. M. ORMOND CENTER  
For Research, Planning and Development  
The Divinity School  
Duke University  
Durham, North Carolina**



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**Jackson W. Carroll, Director  
J. M. Ormond Center for Research, Planning and Development**

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**A Research Report of the J. M. Ormond Center  
for Research, Planning and Development  
Duke University Divinity School  
Durham, North Carolina**

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
1. General Characteristics of Small Membership United Methodist Churches in North Carolina.....	5
1.1 Average Worship Attendance .....	5
1.2 Church School Attendance .....	6
1.3 Membership Growth and Decline .....	7
1.4 Growth, Decline and Stability in the Number of Small Membership Congregations, 1983-93 .....	9
1.5 Founding Dates and Current Facilities .....	10
1.6 Organizational Status of Small Membership Churches .....	12
1.7 Apportionments Paid .....	13
2. Selected Characteristics of the Social Context of Small Membership Churches .....	14
2.1 Location .....	14
2.2 Age Distribution of Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches .....	16
2.3 Racial-Ethnic Makeup of the Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches .....	17
2.4 Types of Households of the Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches .....	17
2.5 Perceived Impact on the Congregations of Selected Changes in the Churches' Social Context.....	18
3. Selected Characteristics of Members and Leaders.....	20
3.1 Age Profile of the Congregations .....	20
3.2 Racial and Ethnic Makeup of the Congregation .....	22
3.3 Gender of Members and Leaders .....	23
3.4 Educational Level of Members and Leaders.....	23
3.5 Occupation of Members and Leaders .....	24
3.6 Distance Members Live From the Church.....	25
3.7 Household Income of Members and Leaders .....	25
3.8 Church and Community Involvement of Leaders and Members.....	26
3.9 The Congregation as a Supportive Community .....	28
4. Selected Characteristics of the Congregations.....	29
4.1 Congregational Identity .....	29
4.2 Congregational Programs.....	30
4.3 Board Members' Assessment of Programs.....	31

4.4 General Assessments of Congregational Functioning and Morale.....	32
4.5 United Methodist Identity and Relationship.....	35
5. Pastoral Leadership.....	36
5.1 Types of Leadership.....	36
5.2 Costs of Pastoral Leadership to the Congregation.....	37
5.3 Personal Characteristics of the Pastors of Small Membership Congregations.....	39
5.4 Member and Board Preferences for Pastoral Leadership.....	41
6. Congregational Growth and Decline.....	44
Some Concluding Observations.....	46
Leadership Issues.....	48



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I am also grateful to my colleagues in the J. M. Ormond Center whose assistance was key to the project's completion: Karen Teague, Senior Research Aide, assisted with much of the analysis, prepared the graphics for the report and oversaw the report's production. John Reeves managed the survey mailing, monitored returns and prepared the data for analysis. William B. Lawrence, Associate Director of the Ormond Center, was a helpful consultant on many points of analysis and interpretation.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the Rural Church Division of the Duke Endowment for making this study possible and for their support of rural ministry generally. I especially acknowledge the support of the Rev. Albert Fisher, the Division's former Director. It was Al Fisher who initiated the study and made it possible with Duke Endowment funding. It is to him that I gratefully dedicate this report.

Jackson W. Carroll

## INTRODUCTION

Three years ago, Albert Fisher, then Director of the Rural Church Division of the Duke Endowment, noted that it had been a long time since a study of rural United Methodist Churches had been done in North Carolina. Was it possible, he asked, to do such a study that would answer the question: "What constitutes a viable congregation?" Is it a matter of size? Resources? Quality of ministry? Is there some point beyond which a congregation is no longer viable? The viability question is especially pertinent given, as we shall see, the large number of quite small congregations (in terms of membership) in the two North Carolina United Methodist Conferences. Yet, in an effort to answer what makes a small membership church viable, one risks the error of using inappropriate criteria, criteria drawn from comparisons with large churches, which violate the character of small congregations. The poet Kathleen Norris has this to say about a rural congregation of 25 members that she served as an interim lay pastor:

Perhaps it's not surprising that so tiny a rural congregation is not often well-served by the larger church of which it is a part. For all their pious talk about "small is beautiful," church bureaucrats, like bureaucrats everywhere, concentrate their attention on places with better demographics, bigger numbers, more power and money. The power of Hope Church and country churches like it is subtle and not easily quantifiable. It's a power derived from smallness and lack of power, a concept the apostle Paul would appreciate, even if modern church bureaucrats lose sight of it.<sup>1</sup>

We agree with Norris' assessment, and after considerable discussion we concluded that the viability question is, finally, a theological question that takes into account the unique characteristics and functions of small membership churches in their settings. It cannot be answered by quantifiable means alone. At the same time, however, we agreed that a statistical profile of small membership United Methodist congregations in North Carolina could provide some important clues to congregational viability. Thus, the Rural Church Division asked the J. M. Ormond Center staff to provide such a profile.

We chose to focus on small membership churches generally rather than rural churches exclusively. There is no simple way to determine in advance for sampling purposes which congregations are rural and which are urban. Since, however, most (not all) rural churches have small memberships, we assumed that, when we selected small membership congregations for study, most of them would turn out to be in rural, rural village or small town settings. That, in fact, proved to be true, as will become clear. We

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<sup>1</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Dakota, A Spiritual Geography* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1993), p. 165.



also assumed that small urban congregations face many similar concerns and that including these congregations in the study would provide information helpful to them. Thus, this study reports a survey of small membership congregations in the two United Methodist Annual Conferences in North Carolina.

How to define a small membership congregation? While small is more than a numerical designation and reflects something of the unique character of a congregation, we needed to use numbers to define which congregations would be included in our survey. We chose to use an average worship attendance of 75 or fewer as a reasonably good marker of small membership congregations. Some have even suggested 45 or fewer as more accurate,<sup>2</sup> but we have somewhat arbitrarily used 75 as our cutting point. Most congregations of this size fit the designation of “single-celled” churches, that is, churches that are essentially primary groups where members know each other personally and interact face-to-face.<sup>3</sup>

Using United Methodist *General Minutes* data for 1991 (the last year available to us when we were in process of drawing our sample of churches) we selected, for each annual conference, the number of congregations that had reported an average worship attendance of 75 or fewer. For the North Carolina Conference, 528 churches met this criterion; for the Western North Carolina Conference, 637 churches had 75 or fewer average worship attendance for the year. We then selected a 20 percent random sample of congregations from each annual conference to receive the various surveys.

What data to gather from these churches? We chose to use several sources of data. (1) Each year the denomination collects statistics for each United Methodist congregation and reports them in the *General Minutes*. We have used selected data from these reports for a 10 year period for *all* North Carolina United Methodist congregations that meet our small membership church criterion. (2) From the sample churches, we requested several types of data: a Fact Sheet to be filled out by the pastor or a knowledgeable lay member that would supplement the kind of information available in the *General Minutes*; a questionnaire to be filled out by all members of the congregation’s administrative board or council,<sup>4</sup> and a shorter but similar questionnaire to be completed by a 10 percent sample of congregational members selected at random. These are persons not currently serving on the congregation’s administrative board. (Pastors were given instructions for drawing this sample.) (3) We also secured

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<sup>2</sup>Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Church is Different!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup>The Discipline allows small membership churches to establish an administrative council that combines the function of the administrative board and council on ministries. Many of our sample churches have done so.

<sup>4</sup>Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), pp. 32 ff.



population data from the U. S. Census bureau for the ZIP code area in which each of these sample congregations is located.<sup>5</sup>

We sent a card to the pastor of each selected sample church asking if the selected church would participate.<sup>6</sup> If the pastor or church refused, we selected the next church on the list in order to maintain the 20 percent per conference sample size. The questionnaires were sent out in the late spring and summer 1994, to 128 churches in the Western North Carolina Conference and 106 churches in the North Carolina Conference. After several follow-up reminders, we received usable returns of the Fact Sheet from pastors or lay leaders of 75 churches (a 58 percent return) in the Western North Carolina Conference and 52 (a 49 percent return) in the N. C. Conference. This constitutes a respectable return rate for mailed surveys, allowing us to generalize from the sample churches about typical characteristics of small membership churches in the two conferences. Because we have some data from the *General Minutes* about both sample churches and all small membership churches in the two conferences, we can compare the sample churches with the larger population. When we do this, we find that the sample churches are almost identical in average number of members when compared with all small churches (an average of 92 members per church in all small churches versus 91 members per church in our sample); slightly higher in average worship attendance (39 for all small churches versus 43 in the sample churches); and also somewhat higher in average church school attendance (27 for all churches versus 34 for the sample churches). These differences do not seem to suggest significant biases in the data. If anything, our sample churches may be *slightly* more active in member participation than is true for the whole, but only slightly so.

In addition to the Fact Sheets, we received usable questionnaires from 855 administrative board/council members and 408 congregational members. Because we asked the pastors to distribute the board surveys, we do not have a count of the total number that were distributed. If, however, one assumes an average of 12 board/council members per church, our return is approximately 57 percent. The 408 member returns constitute a 42 percent return of the 975 member questionnaires that were mailed.

In what follows, we will use data from all of these sources (*General Minutes*, United States Census, Fact Sheet and the two questionnaires) to look at various characteristics of small membership churches in North Carolina. When we use *General Minutes* data, we report on *all* churches with 75 or fewer in average worship attendance and not just the sample churches. In these instances, we also break the data by the two annual conferences. Where we use data from the sample congregations, *we do not treat the annual conferences separately*. This would result in too few cases for analysis. We

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<sup>5</sup>In previous studies of congregations, ZIP codes have proved to be an adequate geographic unit for studying the demographic context of a congregation.

<sup>6</sup> In the case of pastoral charges, only one church per charge was selected to participate.

do not believe, however, that the situation is sufficiently different for small membership churches in the two conferences to make this a problem. It should be clear from the tables or charts what data are being used.

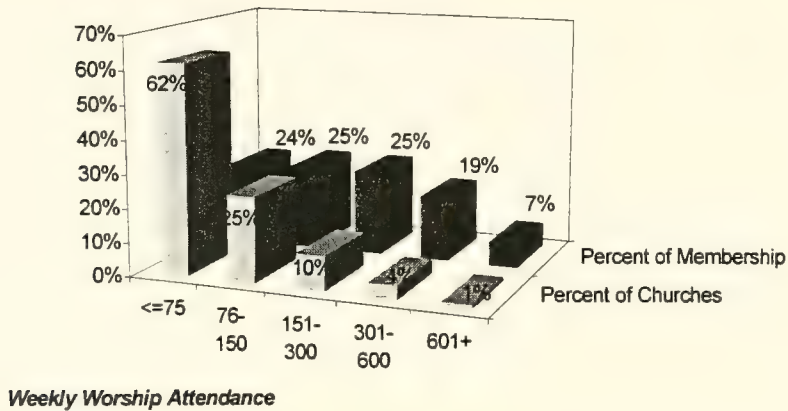
Our report is obviously selective in the data that we summarize. The multiple sources of information about these congregations provide much more data than we can possibly report. Our hope, however, is that the following tables and charts will provide a profile of this large number of congregations in the two annual conferences and will stimulate discussion and reflection on their strengths, limitations and possible futures.



1. **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SMALL MEMBERSHIP UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES IN NORTH CAROLINA (NC and WNC ANNUAL CONFERENCES)**

1. 1 **Percentage of churches and church members in various size categories (as measured by average worship attendance)**

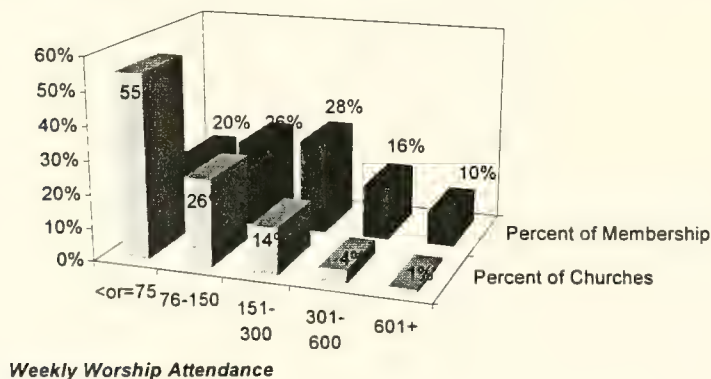
**NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE**  
**PERCENTAGE OF MEMBERSHIP AND CHURCHES GROUPED BY AVERAGE ATTENDANCE**  
**1993**



Source: General Minutes, 1993

(Figure 1.1.1)

**WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE**  
**PERCENTAGE OF MEMBERSHIP AND CHURCHES GROUPED BY AVERAGE ATTENDANCE**  
**1983**



Source: General Minutes, 1983

(Figure 1.1.2)

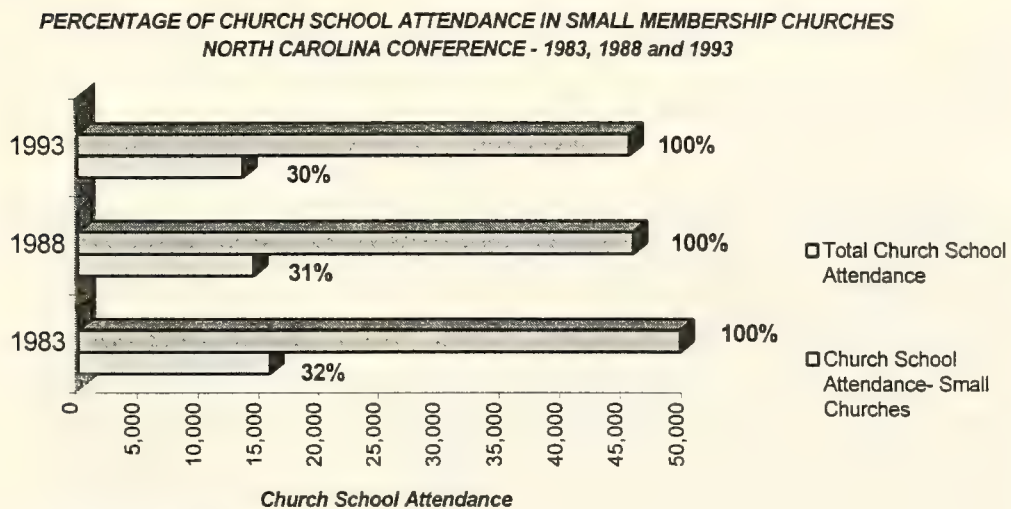
These two figures make clear a striking contrast: Almost two-thirds of the *congregations* in the North Carolina Conference and over half of those in the Western

North Carolina Conference are small membership churches by our definition (averaging 75 or fewer at worship). At the same time, however, only one fourth of the *members* of the North Carolina Conference and one-fifth of the *members* of the Western North Carolina Conference belong to small membership churches. The largest proportion of members belong to mid-sized congregations, averaging between 151 and 300 members at worship. Large congregations, averaging 300 or more in worship, make up only 5 percent of the congregations in either conference, but they account for approximately 25 percent of the conferences' membership. The percentage of small membership churches in each of the two Conferences has increased by three percent from 1983 to 1993.

For the small membership churches in our sample survey, the average worship attendance was 35 per Sunday--this in sanctuaries whose median seating capacity is 130. (The smallest sanctuary seats 60; the largest 350). The congregations' average membership was 91, and the average estimated number of households in the membership was 35.

One further note about worship attendance: When we grouped the congregations into three categories of attendance (table not shown), we found that 22 percent of the congregations average 25 or fewer at worship; 43 percent are in the 26 to 50 per Sunday range; and 35 percent average between 51 and 75.

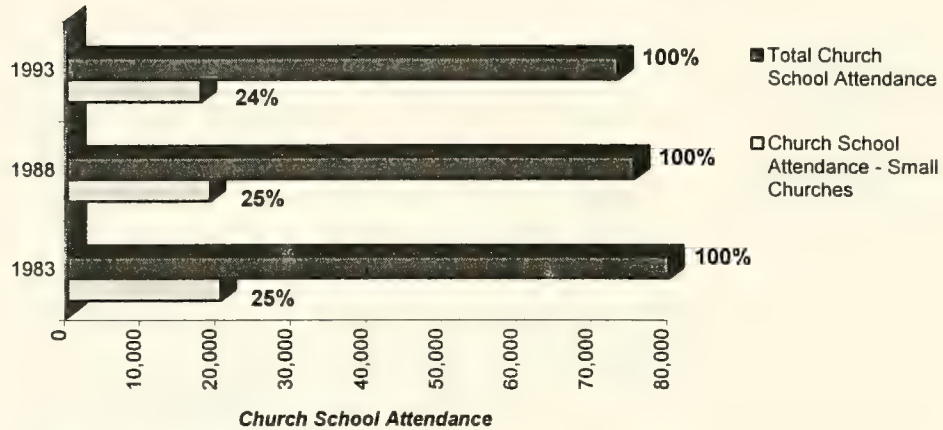
## 1.2 Church School Attendance



Source: General Minutes 1983, 1988 and 1993

(Figure 1.2.1)

**PERCENTAGE OF CHURCH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IN SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES  
WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE - 1983, 1988 AND 1993**



Source: General Minutes 1983, 1988, 1993

**(Figure 1.2.2)**

Here we see that just under one third of the church school attenders in the North Carolina Conference and one-fourth in the Western North Carolina Conference are members of small membership churches. The percentages have changed only slightly over the ten year period--a small increase in the percentage attending church school in small membership churches, probably due to the increase in the number of small churches.

In our survey sample, the average church school attendance of the 127 sample churches was 28.

### **1.3 Membership Growth and Decline**

<i>Turnover Rate</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1988</i>	<i>1993</i>
<b>Membership Beginning of Year</b>	208,000	213,285	217,461
<b>Total Members Received</b>	8,600	8,608	8,476
<b>Total Members Removed</b>	7,301	7,455	7,493
<b>Membership End of Year</b>	209,299	214,438	218,444
<b>Gain/Loss</b>	1,299	1,153	983
<b>Small Church Membership Beginning of Year</b>	53,383	55,740	52,191
<b>Small Church Members Received</b>	1,504	1,476	1,241
<b>Small Church Members Removed</b>	1,989	1,899	1,875
<b>Small Church Membership End of Year</b>	52,898	55,317	51,557
<b>Gain/Loss</b>	-485	-423	-634

**(Table 1.3.1) North Carolina Conference**



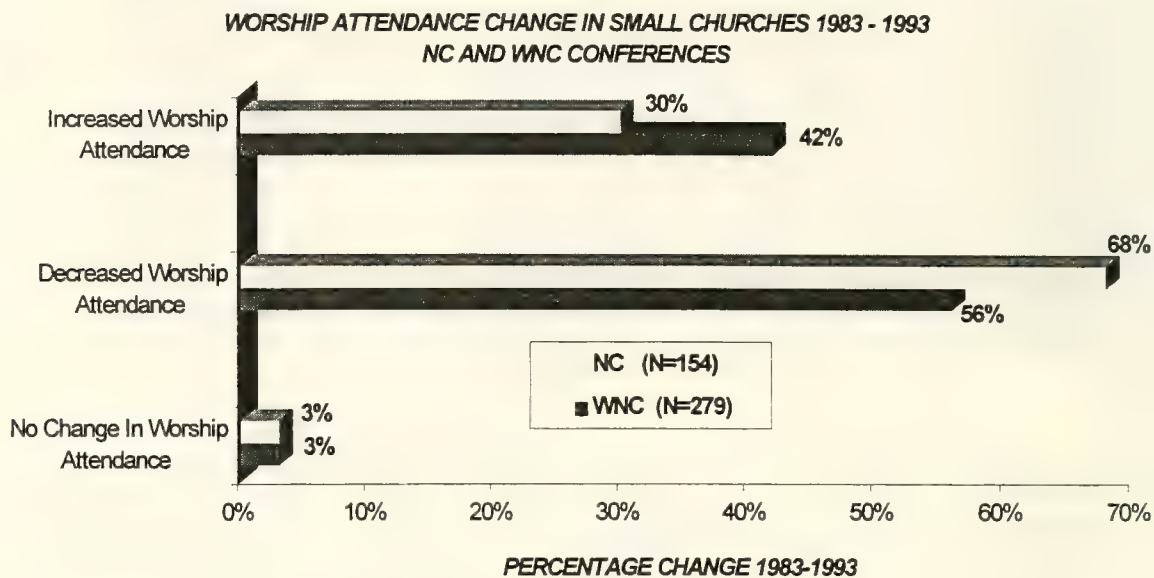
<i>Turnover Rate</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1988</i>	<i>1993</i>
<b>Membership Beginning of Year</b>	276,877	275,908	277,853
<b>Total Members Received</b>	11,299	11,477	11,927
<b>Total Members Removed</b>	11,526	12,145	11,179
<b>Membership End of Year</b>	276,650	275,240	278,601
<b>Gain/Loss</b>	-227	-668	748
<b>Small Church Membership Beginning of Year</b>	53,879	56,450	54,778
<b>Small Church Members Received</b>	1,666	1,440	1,654
<b>Small Church Members Removed</b>	2,080	2,589	1,975
<b>Small Church Membership End of Year</b>	53,465	55,301	54,457
<b>Gain/Loss</b>	-414	-1,149	-321

(Table 1.3.2) Western North Carolina Conference

One measure of congregational performance is the annual gain or loss of members--its turnover or growth rate. The above tables show this rate in the two annual conferences. We see for the North Carolina Conference that, while the growth rate has been positive when *all* churches are considered at three points in time, small membership churches have a *negative* rate for each of the years, having lost more members than they have gained. For the Western North Carolina Conference, the growth rate of all churches was negative in 1983 and 1988, and positive in 1993. Small churches, however, lost members each of the three years.

When looked at as a percentage growth or loss, the figures, at first glance, do not appear large--approximately 1 percent growth overall in each of the three years in the North Carolina Conference and approximately 1 percent in the Western North Carolina Conference. The percentage loss rate for small churches in each conference has also been small--1 percent or less. Though not large, these rates--overall and for small churches--have significant implications. During the decade from 1980-1990, the population of the state of North Carolina grew by 12.7 percent, and the estimated growth from 1990 to 1995 was an additional 7.8 percent. Clearly, the United Methodist Church as a whole has lagged considerably behind population growth in the state. Small membership congregations, with their negative growth rates, have not been the only contributors to the poor performance of the denomination in North Carolina. Removing their performance from the denomination's totals still leaves a large gap between United Methodist growth and the growth of the state's general population. Nonetheless the large proportion of small membership churches in the two conferences magnifies the denomination's troubles when it comes to growth and decline.

## 1.4 Growth, Decline and Stability in the Number of Small Membership Congregations, 1983-93

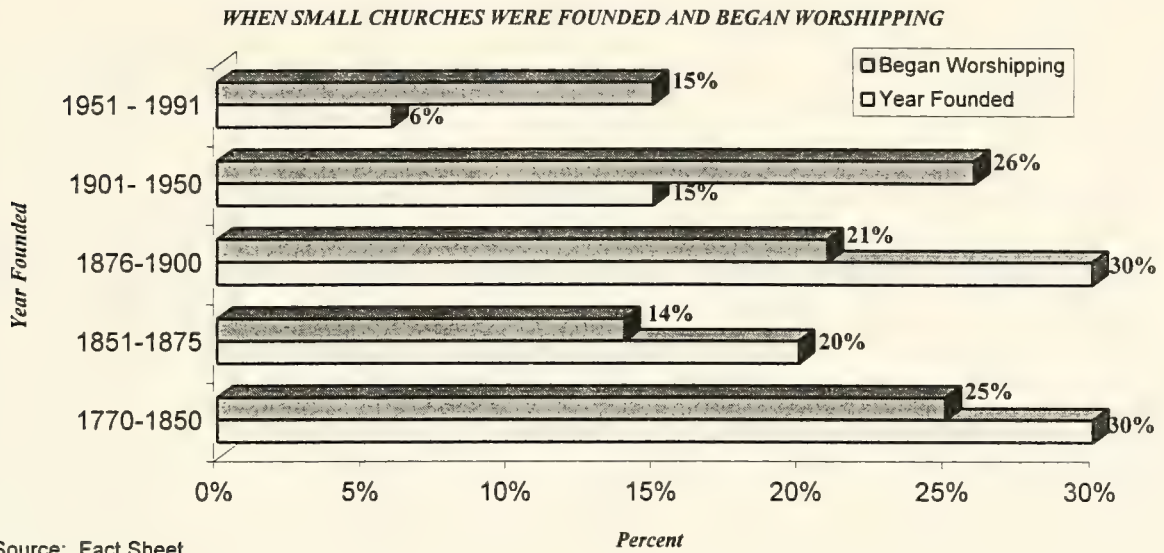


Source: General Minutes 1983, 1993

(Figure 1.4.1)

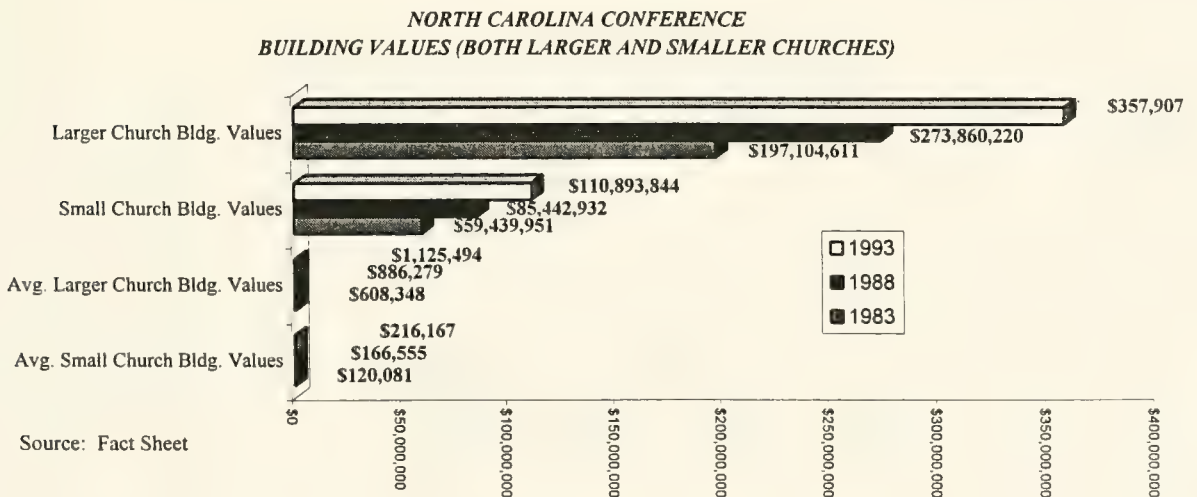
This figure needs explanation: We took all small membership congregations (75 or fewer average worship attendance) in 1983 and found the ones that were still in existence under the same name in 1993. As can be seen by comparing the number for each conference with the total number of small membership churches reported in Figure 1.4.1, we “lost” a considerable number of these congregations over the decade in each annual conference! Presumably many of these congregations were closed or merged with other congregations. Whatever the case, those small congregations in 1983 that survived to 1993 show somewhat similar patterns: those whose worship attendance decreased over the decade significantly out-numbered those whose attendance has increased. This was particularly true for the North Carolina Conference, where 38 percent fewer congregations grew than declined (68 percent that declined versus 30 percent that grew). We look further at membership growth and decline below.

## Founding Dates and Current Facilities



(Figure 1.5.1)

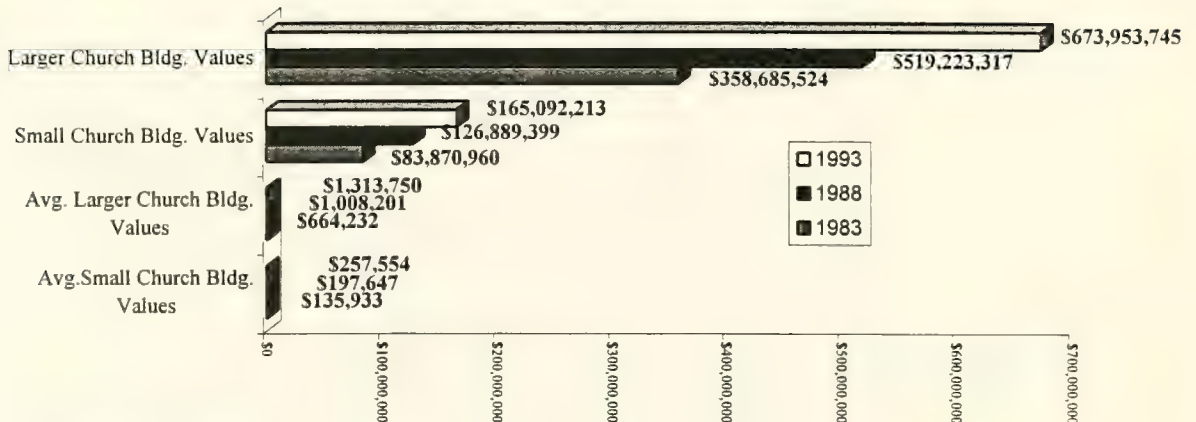
The small membership churches in our sample survey represent a considerable range when it comes to founding dates. The earliest congregation was founded in 1770; the latest in 1989. The majority (76 percent) were founded before 1900, with the median founding year being 1881. In short, most of these churches are 100 or more years old. Many of the churches have been worshipping at the same location for a comparable period of time; just over half have been in the same location since before 1900.



(Figure 1.5.2)



**WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE  
BUILDING VALUES (BOTH LARGE AND SMALL CHURCHES)**



Source: Fact Sheet

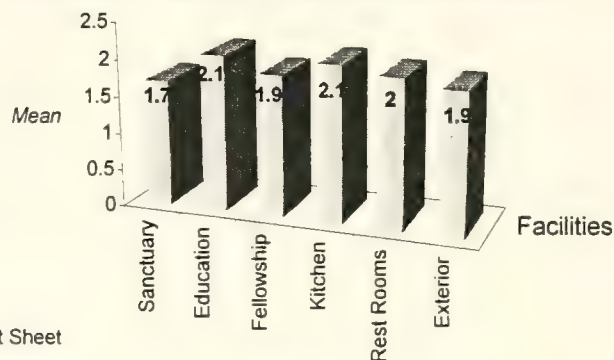
**(Figure 1.5.2)**

Buildings are a major resource for any church, and small membership churches are no exception. Especially in rural areas, but also in towns and cities, church buildings are not only a resource for the congregation but also, potentially, for the surrounding community as a site for various community activities. We will consider programs relating to the community later in the report. Note here, however, the value of church buildings (excluding the parsonage) as reported in the *General Minutes* and shown in the above Figures. In 1993, the average building value for small churches was \$216,167 in the North Carolina Conference and \$257,554 in the Western North Carolina Conference. For all churches as well as for small churches, the value of the church buildings has almost doubled over the past decade, in large part reflecting the effects of inflation.

In addition to church buildings, 71 percent of our sample congregations own parsonages. Sixty-three percent reported having a cemetery as part of the church property.

**BOARD/COUNCILS' ASSESSMENT OF CONGREGATION'S FACILITIES**

Average Score (1=Excellent; 4=Needs Immediate Attention)

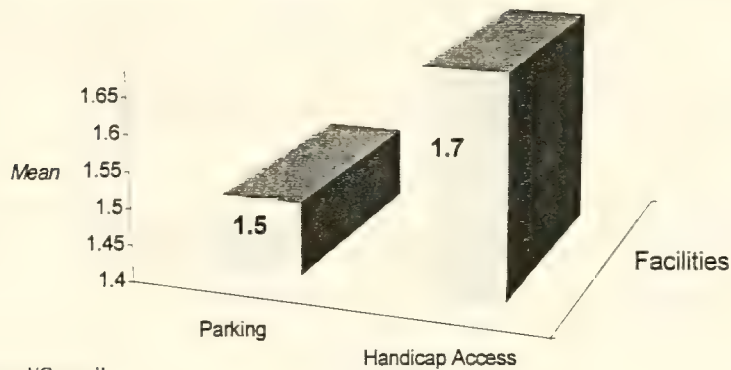


Source: Fact Sheet

**(Figure 1.5.3)**

**BOARD/COUNCILS' ASSESSMENT OF CONGREGATION'S  
PARKING AND HANDICAPPED ACCESSIBILITY**

Avg. Score: 1=Very Adequate; 3=Inadequate



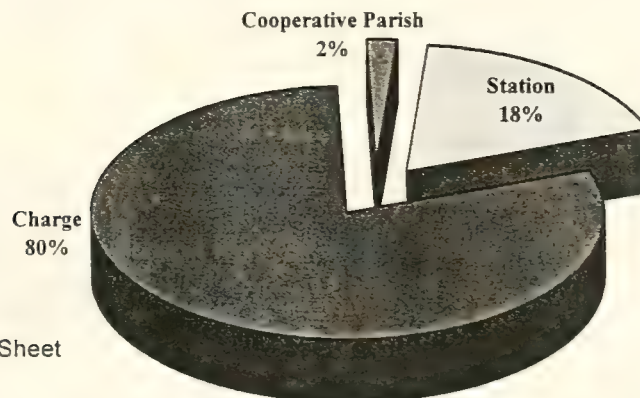
Source: Board/Council

**(Figure 1.5.4)**

We asked board or council members to assess the general condition of their church's facilities. These assessments are shown in Figure 1.5.3 and 1.5.4. We have averaged the range of responses (from "excellent" to "needs immediate attention") for various parts of the buildings. As the graphs reveal, most leaders believe their facilities, especially the sanctuaries and exteriors, to be in good condition. Slightly less positively evaluated are educational facilities and rest rooms. Pastors in small membership churches that have been able to attract new members, especially younger families with children, often report that potential members judge congregations in terms of the condition of their educational facilities and their rest rooms. Most board/council members rate their parking as very adequate. Handicapped access is evaluated as somewhat adequate.

## **1.6 Organizational Status of Small Membership Churches**

**ORGANIZATIONAL STATUS**

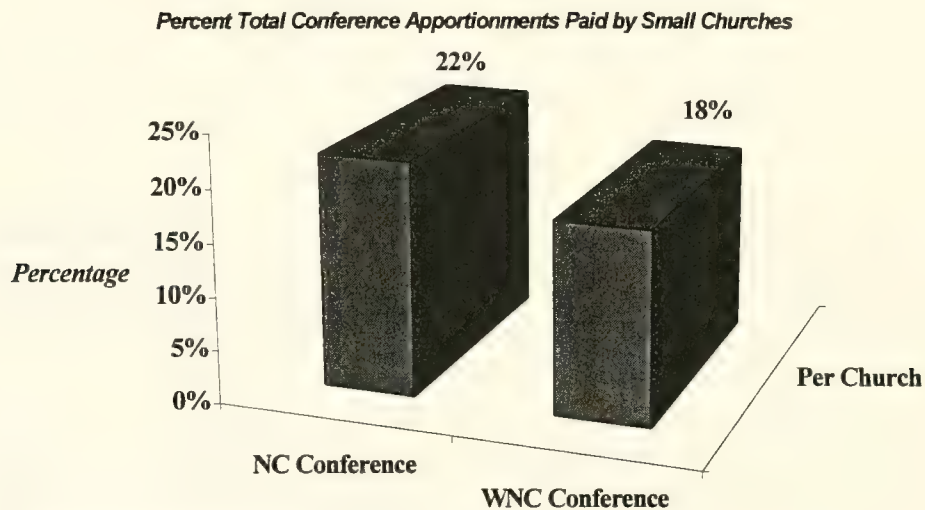


Source: Fact Sheet

**(Figure 1.6.1)**

The figure shows that, for the small membership congregations in our sample, 80 percent are part of a multi-point pastoral charge (used here to connote two or more local churches linked together and sharing a pastor). Two percent are part of a cooperative parish (two or more pastoral charges joined together to coordinate programs and organizational life in the fulfillment of their ministry). The remaining 18 percent are station appointments (a pastoral charge comprised of one local church).

### 1.7 Apportionments Paid

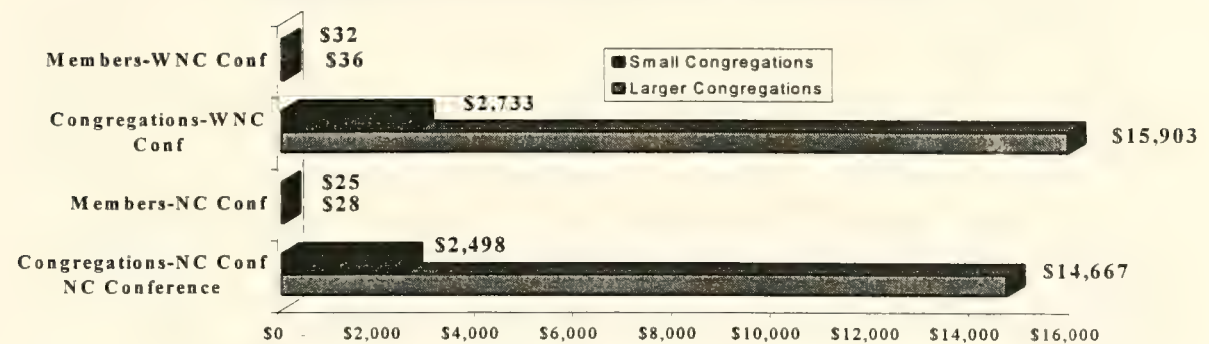


(Fig. 1.7.1)

In the North Carolina Conference, small membership churches contributed approximately 22 percent of the total Conference apportionments in 1993. As previously noted, these congregations constitute over 60 percent of the total number of congregations but only 24 percent of the total membership. In the Western North Carolina Conference, the contribution to apportionments was 18 percent of the total. In that conference, small membership churches make up 55 percent of the total number of congregations, but only 20 percent of the membership.



**Average Per Congregation and Per Member Contributions to Apportionments  
Western North Carolina Conference and North Carolina Conference**



Source: General Minutes, 1993

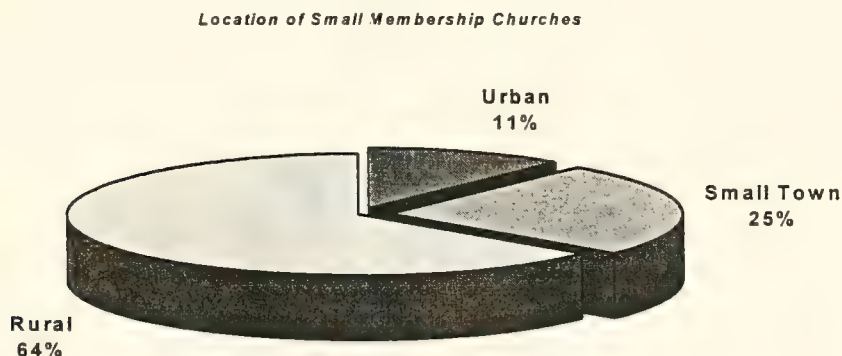
**(Figure 1.7.2)**

The average *per congregation* contribution to apportionments in the North Carolina Conference in 1993 was \$14,667 for all congregations and \$2,498 for small membership congregations. The average *per member* contribution for all churches was \$28, and for small membership churches it was \$25. In the Western North Carolina Conference, the average *per congregation* contribution in 1993 was \$15,903 for all churches and \$2,733 for small churches. The average *per member* contribution was \$36 for all churches and \$32 for members of small churches.

*While small churches obviously do not contribute as much per church in total dollars as larger churches, their per member contributions to apportionments is only slightly less than that of all churches in each of the two conferences.*

## **2. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SMALL MEMBERSHIP CHURCHES**

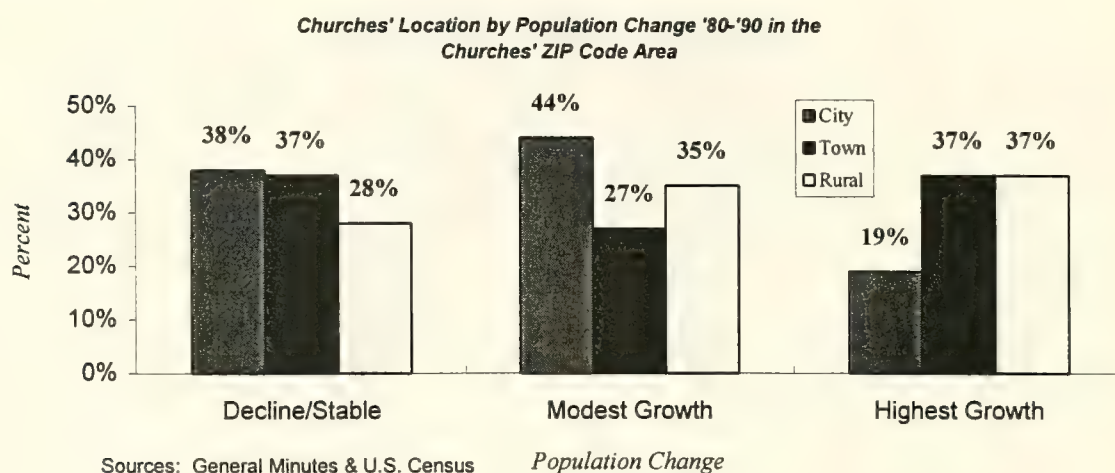
### **2.1 Location**



**(Figure 2.1.1)**

Of the small membership churches in our survey, the large majority (64 percent) are located in a rural area; another 25 percent are in small towns (under 10,000 population); and the remainder (11 percent) in small and large cities (more than 10,000 population).

We examined population change between 1980 and 1990 in the ZIP Code areas in which the churches are located. ZIP Codes are smaller geographic units than counties and give some indication of population characteristics in the congregation's more immediate locale. Although we do not show the table here, we found that only about one fourth of the sample congregations are in ZIP Codes that remained stable or declined in population during the decade (the greatest decline was 28 percent). The remainder (approximately 75 percent) are located in ZIP Codes that experienced modest or high growth (9 percent or higher growth during the decade).



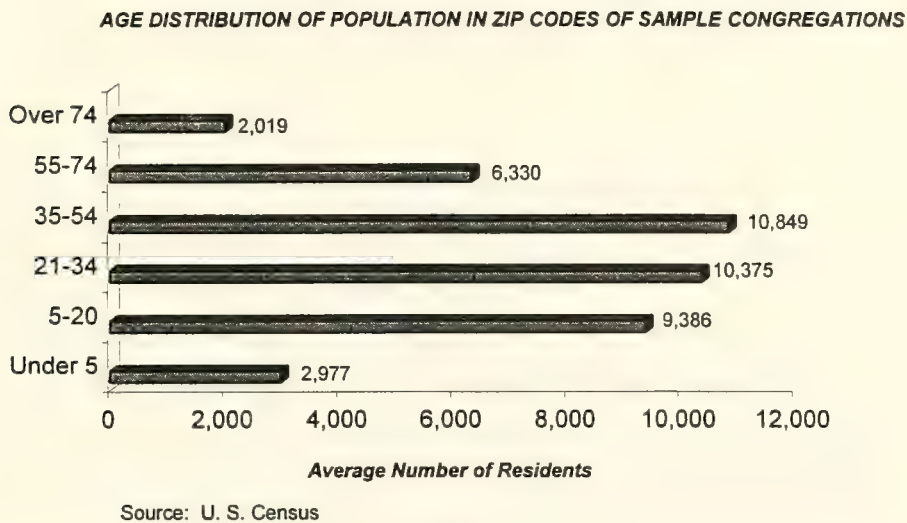
**(Figure 2.1.2)**

In Figure 2.1.2, we see that the majority of urban congregations (44 percent) are located in ZIP Code areas that experienced a modest population growth, with another 38 percent in stable or declining communities. Thirty-seven percent of the rural and small town churches were in ZIP Code areas experiencing the highest growth, but an equal percentage of small town churches were in areas that were stable or declining. Combining rural congregations located in areas with modest and high growth shows that over 7 of 10 rural churches were located in these growing areas.

In separate analyses (not shown) we looked at the relationship between population growth or decline (1980-1990), church location (rural, town, city) and several measures of performance: membership, worship attendance and church school attendance change between 1983 and 1993. We found only one significant correlation between these various measures: Population growth and membership growth were positively related, though the relationship was weak. This positive relationship did not hold for either worship attendance or church school attendance growth.

*In fact, half of our sample churches experienced declines in membership, and approximately 60 percent declined in worship attendance and church school attendance over the decade, regardless of where they were located or whether the population was declining, stable or growing.*

## 2.2 Age Distribution of Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches

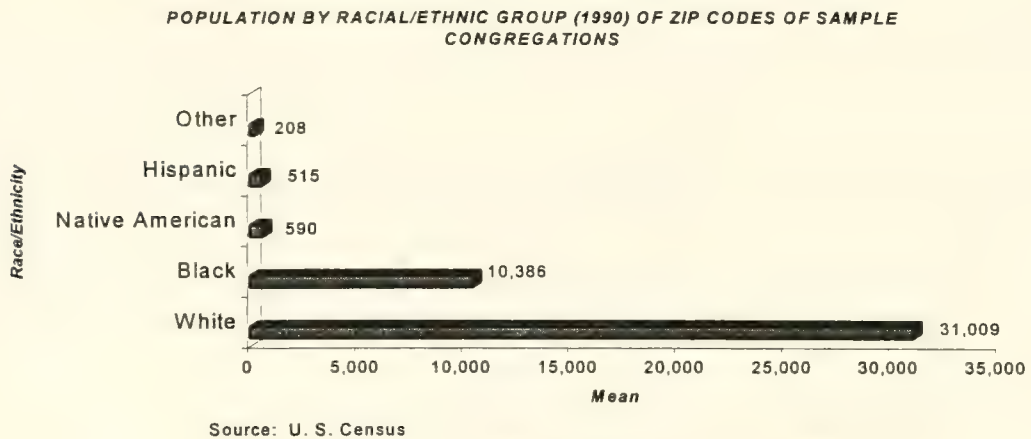


(Figure 2.2.1)

The average age of the population in the churches' ZIP codes contrasts sharply with the estimates of the age of church members which we show below in Figure 3.1.1. In the case of the congregations, approximately 53 percent of the membership of small churches in our sample are age 55 or older; however, the majority of the residents of the ZIP Codes in which the churches are located are young and middle adults between the ages of 21-54. Of these, 25 percent are between 21 and 34 years old. Older adults, similar in age to that of the congregations, are but 20 percent of the population in the churches' ZIP Code areas.



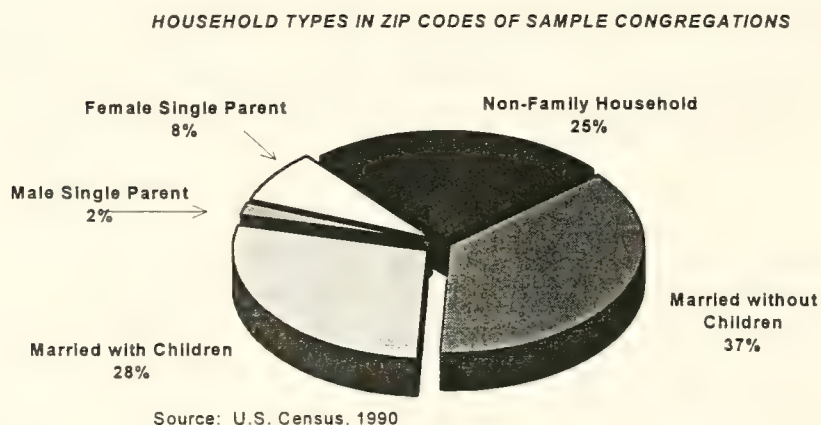
## 2.3 Racial-Ethnic Makeup of the Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches



(Figure 2.3.1)

Whites constituted the large majority of residents of the ZIP Code areas of our sample congregations in 1990: 73 percent. African Americans were the next major group at 24 percent. Native Americans, Hispanics and others made up the remaining 3 percent. Of the latter group, Native Americans were 1.3 percent. These proportions are roughly comparable to the racial-ethnic population distribution of the state as a whole in 1990. Since, however, these are 1990 Census figures, they probably under-represent the number of Hispanics in the areas in which sample churches are located. While Hispanics still are a distinct minority in the North Carolina population, their numbers are growing rapidly, especially in rural areas of the state where many first came as migrant workers.

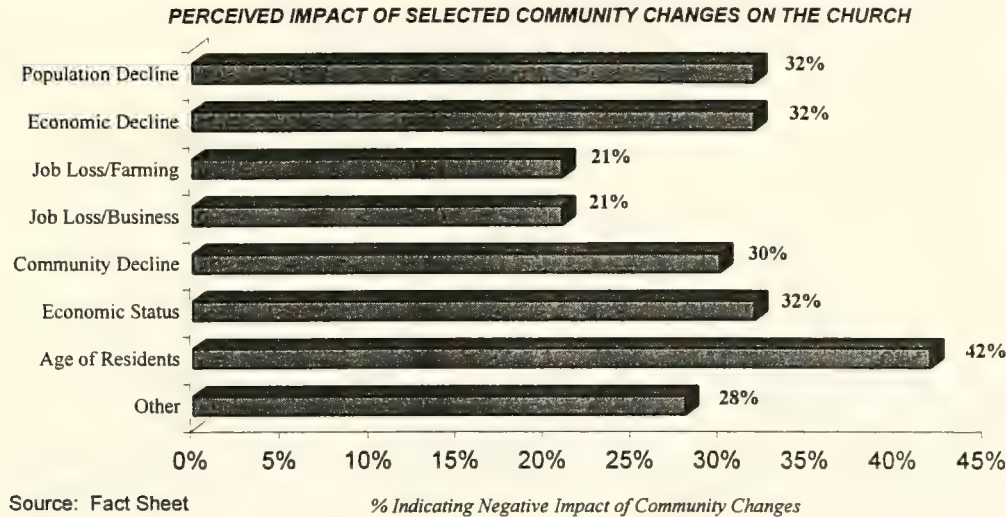
## 2.4 Types of Households of the Population in the ZIP Code Areas of Small Membership Churches



(Figure 2.4.1)

The figure showing household types in the congregations' context shows that households consisting of a married couple with no children (under age 18) present in the home is the typical type of household (37 percent). This type is followed closely by households made up of married couples with children (28 percent). Ten percent are single parent households, mostly headed by women (8 percent). Non-family households (single householders and non-married individuals living together) constitute the remaining 25 percent. These percentages closely parallel those for the entire state. When we looked at household types by the types of communities in which sample churches are located, we found no significant differences among city, town or rural locations.

**2.5 Perceived Impact on the Congregations of Selected Changes in the Churches' Social Context**



**(Figure 2.5.1)**

In the Fact Sheet, we asked about the impact of a variety of community changes on congregations: whether they had a positive or negative impact, or no effect. Figure 2.5 shows the percentages for perceived *negative* impact of the changes. The most often mentioned change having a negative impact was the age of community residents--mentioned by four out of ten pastors. Also singled out by at least one in three pastors as having negative effects on the congregations were the economic status of community residents and a sense of general community and economic decline.

When we looked at these responses by the location of the sample congregation (tables not shown), we found that congregations in urban locations (over 30 percent) were more likely to view the changing age of community residents positively, while almost half of the rural congregations saw this as negative. At least one in three pastors of congregations in all locations, especially urban congregations, said that general community decline was having a negative impact. Job loss through business relocation

and moving has had negative impact on both urban and town churches, and changes in farming were viewed negatively by about a fourth of the rural congregations.

When we looked at these assessments of the effects of community changes by changes in worship attendance between 1983 and 1993 (tables not shown), we found that the age of community residents and general community, economic and population declines were viewed as having negatively impacted the congregation in one-fourth to one-half of all congregations regardless of actual changes in worship attendance. In contrast, approximately 20 percent of the pastors of congregations whose attendance was stable or growing viewed these changes as positive. Pastors in congregations with declining or stable attendance also added farming changes and job loss through business closing or relocation to their list of negative effects. General community renewal and new school construction were viewed as positively affecting many of the congregations whose attendance had grown over the decade. We make two observations about these perceptions of negative and positive effects:

Most pastors viewed the age of community residents as having a *negative* impact of the congregation. While we cannot tell from the data whether the perceived negative impact of the age of community residents was because the population was becoming younger or older, we presume it is the latter--that is, a perception of an aging population. If this is the case, then *pastors are misreading the actual situation, since the average age of residents in the ZIP code areas in which the churches are located is significantly lower than that of the congregation's members.*

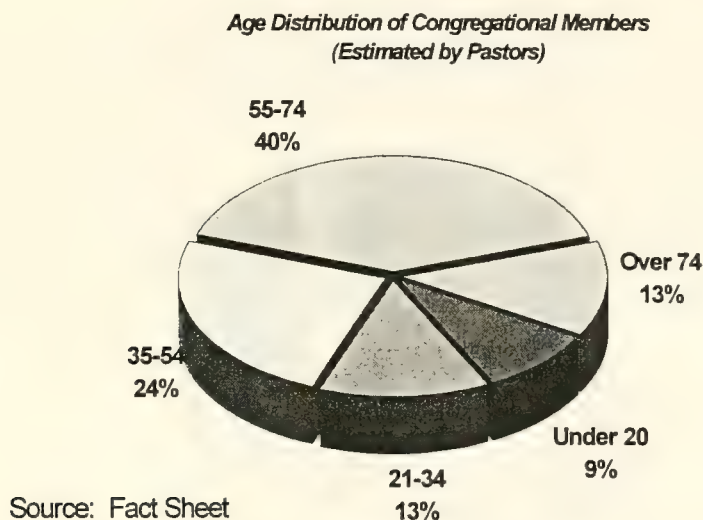
There was a perception by a significant number of pastors that general population decline was impacting their congregations negatively. However, when we looked at the ZIP code population trends, *three-fourths of those congregations saying that population decline was affecting them negatively were in ZIP codes that had experienced modest or high growth from 1980-1990.*

In both of these cases, it appears that perceptions are not in accord with reality!



### 3. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF MEMBERS AND LEADERS

#### 3.1 Age Profile of the Congregations

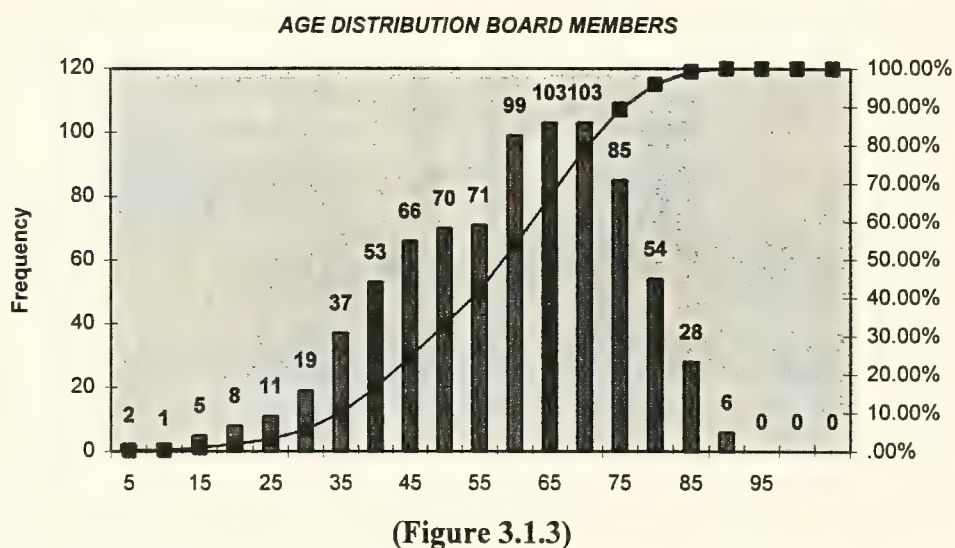
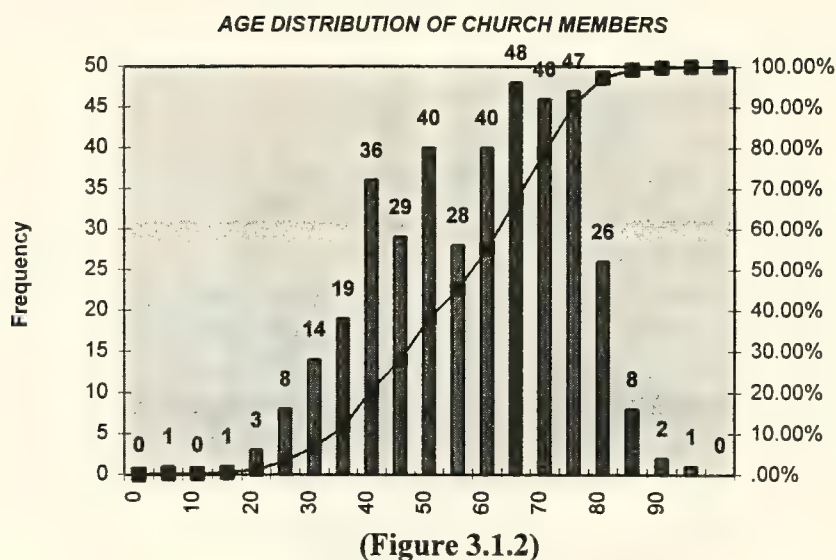


(Figure 3.1.1)

We looked previously at the age distribution of community residents in the areas where the churches are located. Here we look at the ages of the members. Recent studies have shown that the United Methodist Church generally is an aging denomination: A 1994 survey of members revealed that approximately 61 percent of the lay members of the denomination as a whole were age 50 or older. The average age of members nationally was 55.4 years.<sup>6</sup> When we consider the age distribution of small membership churches in our two conferences, it is also evident that small membership churches in our two conferences are disproportionately older. The percentages for different age groups are based on the pastors' estimates of the age distribution of their congregation and represent the average percent estimated in each age group. Forty percent are between age 50 and 74, with another 13 percent over age 74. This more than reverses the population distribution of North Carolina, where the age 20 and under population is approximately 30 percent and those 55 and over are approximately 14 percent of the whole. As we noted, the age distribution of the ZIP Code areas in which our sample churches are located is quite similar to that of the state as a whole.

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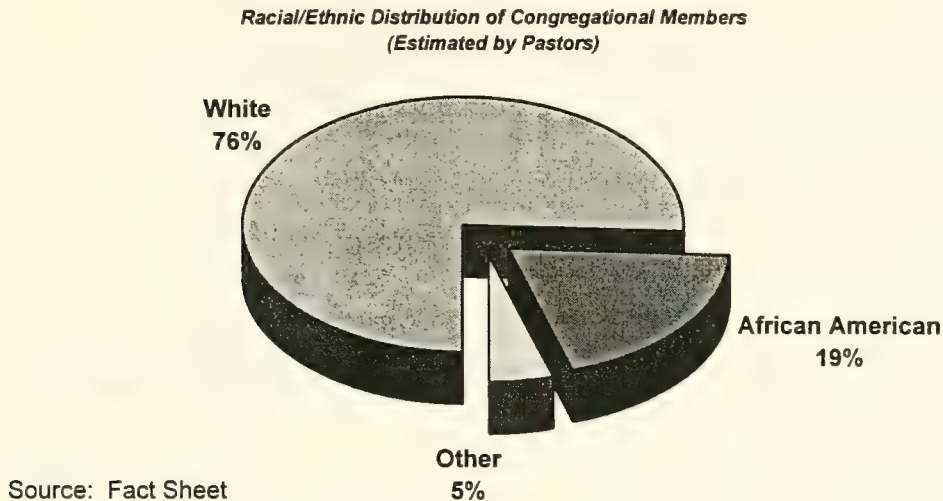
<sup>6</sup> Office of Research, United Methodist General Council on Ministries. A Profile of United Methodists Based on the Survey of United Methodist Opinion, 1995.



These two figures offer a further look at the age of members and leaders, using self-reported age by congregational members and administrative board/council members who completed our questionnaire. The bars of each graph show the distribution of members or leaders by age. The average (mean) age is 55.8 years for members and 56.9 for board/council members (almost identical to the average age of United Methodists nationally), but the figures show that both members and leaders are disproportionately older than we might have expected had members and leaders been normally distributed across the age spectrum. (The diagonal line in each of the graphs represents the cumulative percentages.)

Although we do not show the tables here, both members and leaders tend to be long-time community residents. Members on average have lived in their communities 37 years and leaders 38 years. Six percent of the members and leaders indicated that they have lived in the community 70 or more years, *with the longest being 93 years!*

### 3.2 Racial and Ethnic Makeup of the Congregations



(Figure 3.2.1)

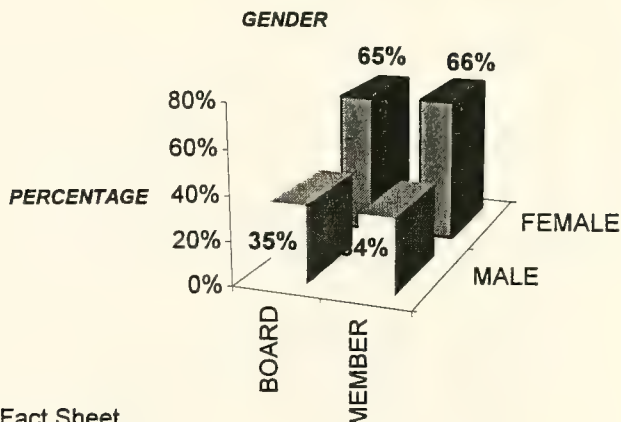
The above figure shows pastors' estimates of the racial distribution of their congregations. The percentages are only approximate, since our sample probably under represents Native American congregations and may also slightly under represent African American congregations.<sup>7</sup> The figure shows that whites make up the large majority of members of the sample congregations: 75 percent in contrast to 19 percent African American and 5 percent Other (Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American). These figures not only represent the percentage of members in the various racial and ethnic groups, but they also generally represent the percentage of congregations by their racial and ethnic makeup, since most of our survey congregations are racially homogeneous.

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<sup>7</sup>This was not intentional. We made every effort to get adequate representation from all groups; however, the number of Native American congregations responding was quite small.



### 3.3 Gender of Members and Leaders

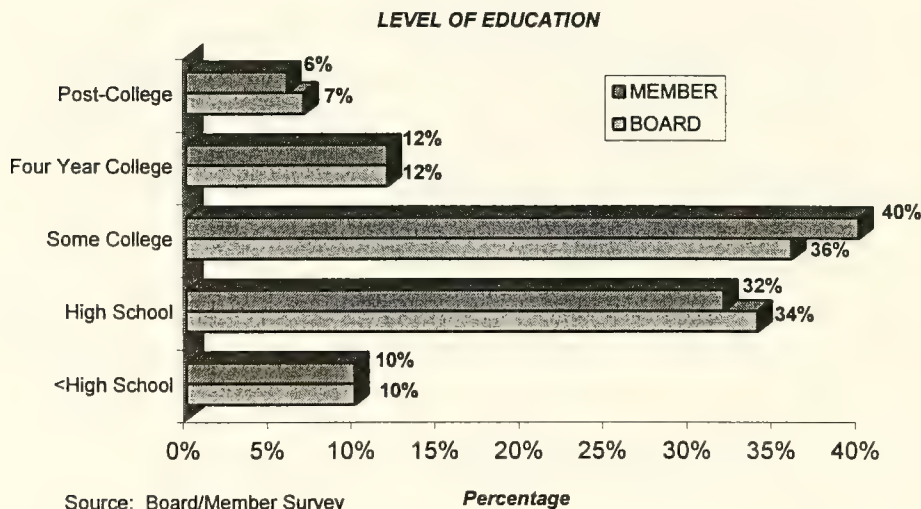


Source: Fact Sheet

(Figure 3.3.1)

The majority of those completing the member and leader surveys were women--approximately 65 percent. A 1994 survey of United Methodist members nationally found that 60 percent of the members were women.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.4 Educational Level of Members and Leaders



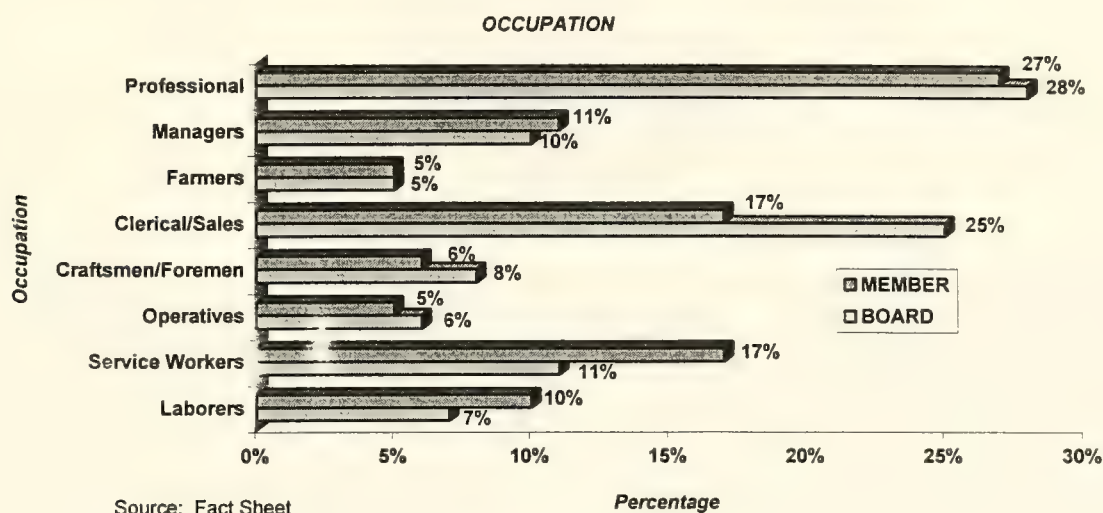
Source: Board/Member Survey

(Figure 3.4.1)

<sup>8</sup>GCOM, *Profile of United Methodists*, p. 8.

A substantial number of small church members (40 percent) and leaders (36 percent) have had college or vocational school education. In each group, an additional 20 percent have either completed college or had some post-graduate education. Of the remainder, most are high school graduates.

### 3.5 Occupation of Members and Leaders

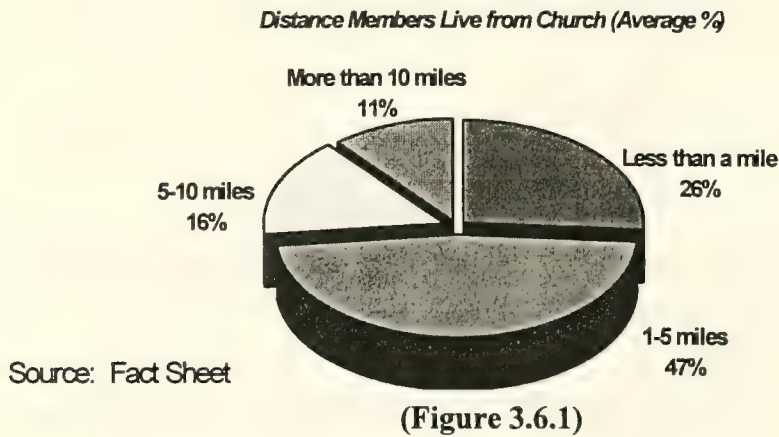


(Figure 3.5.1)

Persons in the professions constitute the largest occupational group of both members and leaders (just under 30 percent), closely followed by a fourth of the leaders who are in clerical or sales occupations. *What is most striking about Figure 3.5.1 is the very low percentage of farmers--only 5 percent of members and leaders--in spite of the rural location of the majority of the sample congregations.* In many respects, however, this should not come as a surprise, since the number of farms in North Carolina declined by 18.6 percent between 1982 and 1987, a loss of 13,500 farms in this five-year period.<sup>9</sup>

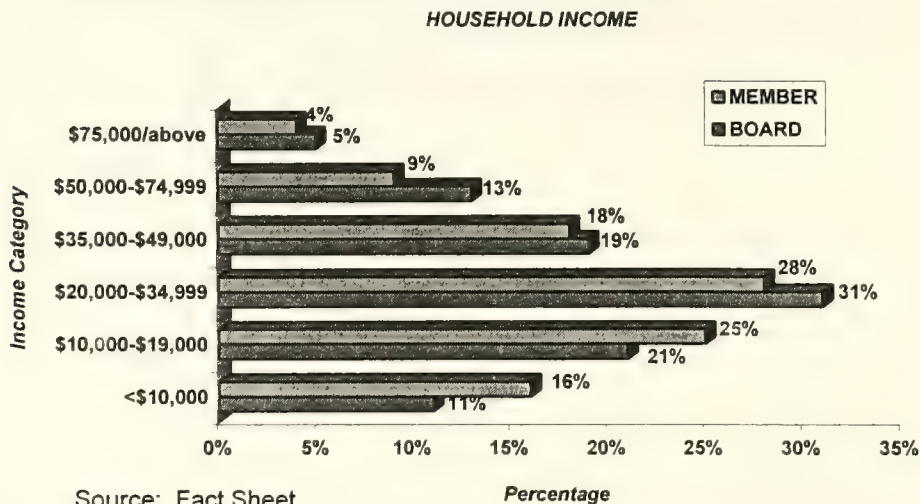
<sup>9</sup>North Carolina Rural Profile, *Economic and Social Trends Affecting Rural North Carolina*. (The North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center, November 1992), p. 12.

### 3.6 Distance Members Live From the Church



This figure is based on pastors' estimates in the Fact Sheet. By a considerable majority, members live five or fewer miles from the church. When we looked at these estimates by the type of community in which the churches are located (not shown), we found, as might be expected, that half of the members of city churches lived less than a mile from the church, as do approximately 45 percent of members of town churches. The typical rural church member (approximately 55 percent) lives between one and five miles from the church. We also asked leaders and members about how many minutes it took them to drive to church. City and rural church leaders and members averaged approximately eight minutes travel time, with a high of thirteen and a low of three for those in city churches and twenty-two and four minutes respectively for those in rural areas. Those in small town churches averaged a nine minute drive to church, with a high of twenty-four minutes and a low of three.

### 3.7 Household Income of Members and Leaders





The figure compares the household incomes of members and leaders. While the household incomes of the two groups are relatively similar, those of the leaders are slightly higher than members. The average (mean) household income for the ZIP codes in which the congregations are located was \$31,190 in 1989.

### 3.8 Church and Community Involvement of Leaders and Members

**Table 3.8.1 – Participation in Selected Church Activities, Two to Three Times per Month or More -- Board/Council and Members**

	Board/Council				Members			
	Weekly	2-3 /Month	1/Month	Few/ Never	Weekly	2-3 /Month	1/Month	Few/ Never
<b>Worship</b>	81%	16%	1%	1%	69%	24%	45	3%
<b>Sunday School</b>	72	9	2	17	62	10	4	24
<b>Bible Study</b>	20	6	9	66	19	7	5	69
<b>Choir/Music</b>	36	10	2	52	31	9	2	57
<b>Community/Social Ministries</b>	10	11	12	68	10	10	12	68
<b>Seek Converts/New Members</b>	9	8	9	74	9	7	8	76
<b>Church Fellowship</b>	14	19	28	40	15	15	24	45
<b>Church Bldg. Upkeep</b>	12	11	15	62	10	10	11	70
<b>Community Groups</b>	17	15	15	53	19	15	16	50

The figure summarizes responses to a number of questions that we asked both board/council members and the general member sample about their level of involvement in a variety of church and community activities. We gave a number of response categories for each activity ranging from weekly to never. To reduce lengthy tables for each of the activities, we have combined categories for those who reported they participate “a few times a year” and “never” in each of the activities.

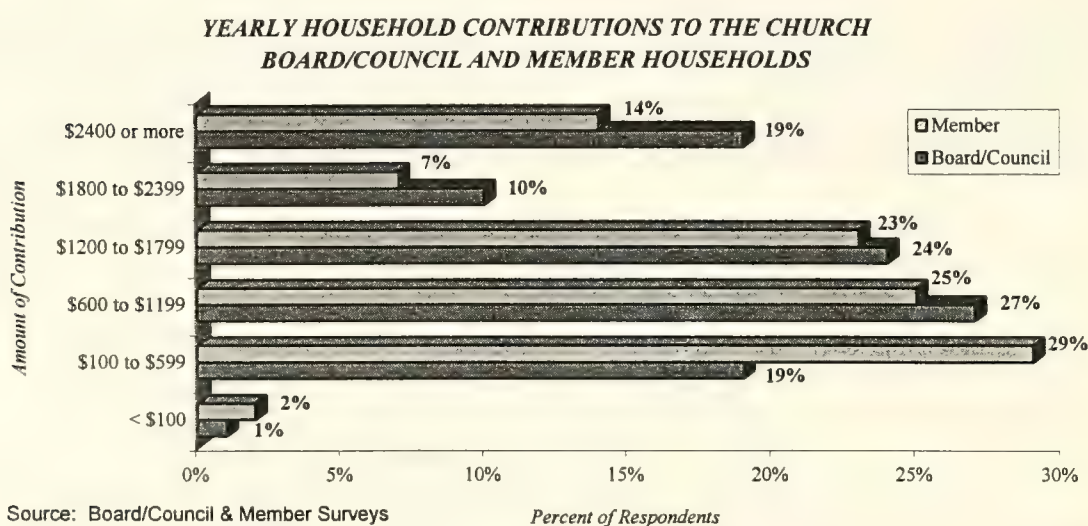
When it comes to Sunday worship and Sunday School, our respondents are regular attenders. Almost all the leaders and most members attend worship at least two to three times a month (81 percent of the leaders attend weekly as compared with 69 percent of the members). Sunday School attendance is slightly less, though 80 percent of the leaders and 72 percent of the members attend at least two or three times monthly.

Involvement in other types of church activities is considerably less, as the graph makes clear. We note that *this is especially true for the reported participation in community ministries and in evangelistic outreach to those outside the church.* Between

20 and 25 percent of members and leaders say that they never take part in these activities, and between 40 and 50 percent say that they do so only a few times a year. These figures may give important clues to the lack of growth of so many of the congregations in our sample. Members are quite involved in the congregation's worship and Sunday school life, but they do not often reach out to others in the community who are not part of the church's fellowship. In one sense, this is understandable, since we suspect that many members value the more intimate fellowship that the small size of these congregations promotes (see section 3.9 below) and which they might lose if the congregation were to grow significantly. Commentators on small membership churches have noted the difficulty that many small congregations experience in incorporating new members into the "family."

Additionally, we asked leaders and members about their practices of private prayer and meditation. Sixty-four percent of the leaders and 60 percent of the members indicated that they practice daily prayer and meditation. Only 6 to 8 percent say that they never pray.

In the list of activities, we also included a question about participation in civic, school, political, professional or other community groups. Thirty-two percent of the leaders and 34 percent of the members participate in such groups at least two or three times a month.



(Figure 3.8.2)

Giving to the church is an important type of involvement. In Figure 3.8.2, we see that the majority of leaders and members are clustered in two levels of annual household giving: \$600-\$1199 and \$1200-\$1799. At the same time, 19 percent of the leaders and 14 percent of the members contribute \$2400 or more per year to the church. When asked whether their contribution is a tithe, 43 percent of the leaders and 40 percent of the members said yes. While we do not have comparable data for larger churches, *we doubt*



*that the level of per household giving in larger United Methodist congregations would be as high, nor would the number of tithers. We suspect that members of small churches typically give more, per capita or per household, than members of larger congregations, in part, because the small size of the congregation makes it easier for them to recognize the importance of each gift for the congregation's survival. They are less able assume that others will pick up the slack!* Another way of saying this is that there are typically fewer “free riders” in small congregations than in large ones.

### **3.9 The Congregation as a Supportive Community**

Small membership churches are frequently close-knit, primary communities for their members. We asked members and leaders several questions about this aspect of their church life. Here is a summary of their responses:

- *How many of their closest friends (outside their families) are members of their congregation?* The average number was approximately 2.6. The averages did not differ significantly when taking the churches' locations into account.
- *How many visit with members of their congregation outside of church related activities?* Over half of the board/council members and 47 percent of the general membership say that they visit with members of the congregation outside of church related activities. There were no significant differences between those in city, town or rural areas.
- *Are there people in the congregation, other than family members, on whom members and leaders can rely to talk about their deepest problems?* Approximately half of each group said that this was true “most of the time.” Less than 20 percent said “rarely or never.” Although the differences between city, town or rural church members were not statistically significant, members of rural churches were about half as likely to check “most of the time” than the others and more likely to check “some of the time.” In other words, they are more reticent to “open up” to fellow members about their problems.
- *In times of trouble, can they count on someone in the church (other than family) for help?* Eighty-one percent of leaders and members said that this was true “most of the time.” Less than 5 percent said “rarely or never.” Again, the differences by church location were not statistically significant; however 90 percent of rural church members said “most of the time,” as compared with just over 75 percent of the others.
- *In general, how important is the church in your life?* In response, 94 percent of the leaders and 89 percent of the members said that the church is “very important.” Less than 1 percent of each said that it is “not important at all.” There were no differences by church location.



The responses to these various questions make it quite clear that, *while small in numbers of members, these congregations are central institutions in the lives of members and leaders. At least for those responding to the questionnaire, they not only support their congregations with their presence and their money, they find meaning for their lives and a supportive community in return.*

## 4. SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONGREGATIONS

### 4.1 Congregational Identity

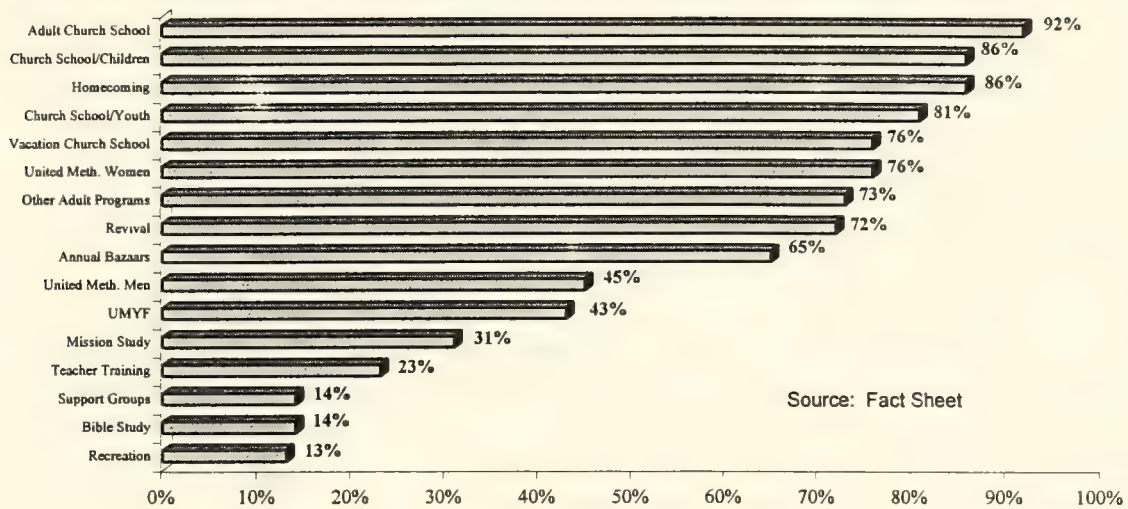
**Figure 4.1 Board/Council Member's Perceptions of Their Congregation's Identity**

- more influenced by history and tradition than by contemporary ideas and trends;
- members similar in values and life styles to those in the community about them rather than different;
- almost equal in emphasizing service to members and serving the community beyond the membership;
- more like a large family than a loosely knit association of members or groups;
- somewhat more likely to say that they are not considered among the "status" churches in the area than one of the prestigious ones;
- giving strong expression to their United Methodist identity rather than downplaying it.

Congregations often vary along a number of characteristics. We listed six pairs of characteristics. (Each pair was expressed in terms of opposite characteristics.) We then asked administrative board/council members to choose which of the two opposing characteristics was more like their congregation. In Figure 4.1, we have summarized the profile of small membership churches as perceived by the majority of their leaders.

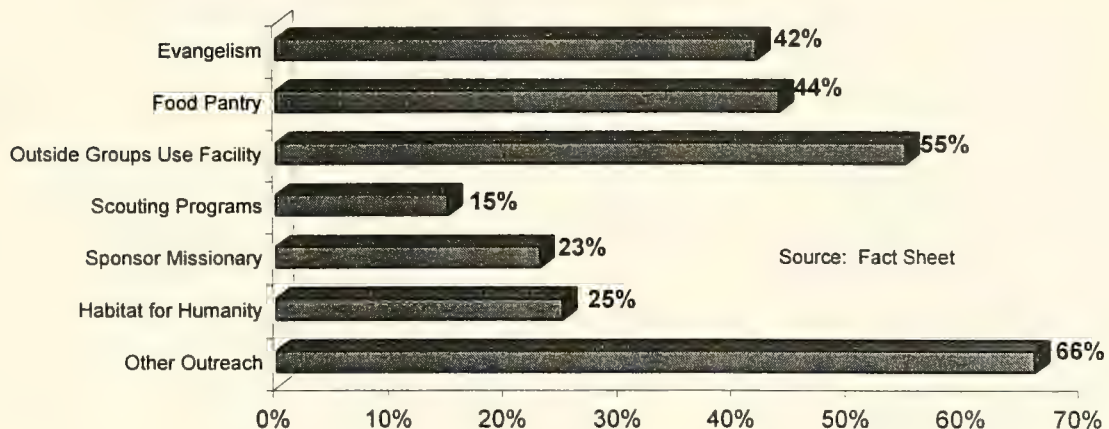
## 4.2 Congregational Programs

### CONGREGATIONAL PROGRAMS THAT ARE PRIMARILY INTERNALLY FOCUSED



(Figure 4.2.1)

### CONGREGATIONAL PROGRAMS THAT ARE PRIMARILY EXTERNALLY FOCUSED



(Figure 4.2.2)

On the Fact Sheet, we listed a number of programs and gave several options for each type of program. We excluded Sunday worship from the list, assuming that it would be universally observed. We will not attempt here to summarize the entire pattern of responses for each individual program. Instead we show the percentages of congregations offering the various programs in Figures 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. In the two figures we made an effort to group the programs into two categories: *internally focused programs*, that is, programs offered primarily in the congregation and mostly for congregation members; (2)

*externally focused programs*, that is, mostly focused on the community around the church or on global concerns. These divisions are somewhat arbitrary, since some programs labelled as internally focused are likely also to involve non-members; nevertheless, the division does give some indication of the relative balance between the two types of programs. If our grouping is at all accurate, the preponderance of programs are internally focused. Interestingly, after adult church school and tied with children's church school, annual homecomings are celebrated in the large majority (86 percent) of our sample churches. Among externally focused programs (besides the "other outreach program" category), the most often present forms of outreach are allowing community groups to use the congregation's facilities and sponsoring food pantries. These are followed by evangelistic outreach and involvement in Habitat for Humanity efforts.

Although we have not shown the analysis, there was no correlation between the number of either type of program and whether the church was located in a city, small town or rural area. There was also, somewhat to our surprise, no correlation between the number of external or internal programs and change (growth or decline) in membership, attendance at worship or church school attendance.

### 4.3 Board Members' Assessment of Programs

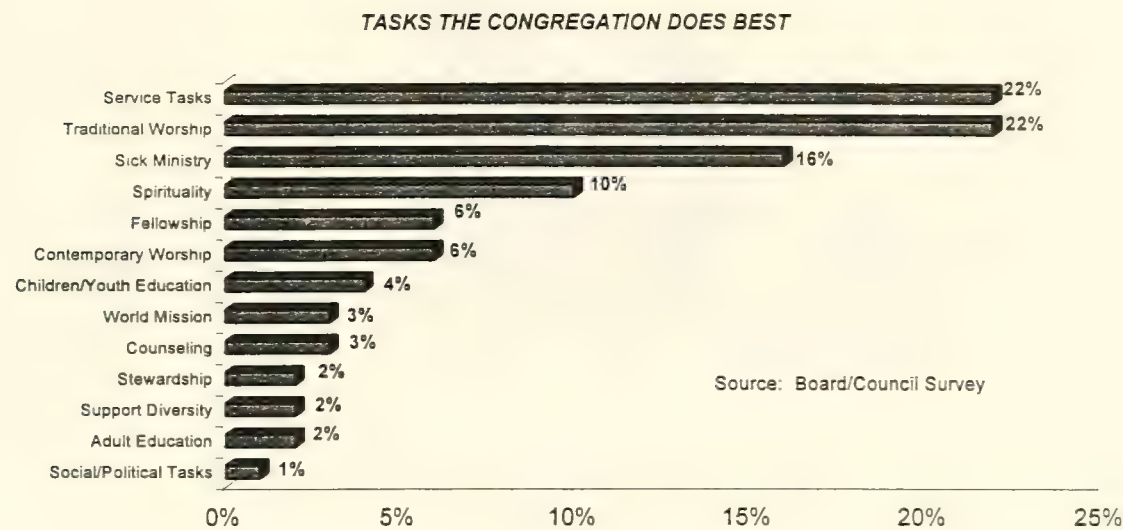
Table 4.3.1 -- Tasks of the Church

	More Emphasis	Generally	Less Emphasis
Traditional Worship Style	9%	87%	5%
Contemporary Worship Style	10%	82%	8%
Children & Youth Christian Ed.	53%	44%	3%
Adult Christian Education	29%	70%	2%
Deepening Spirituality	45%	53%	2%
Sharing Gospel With Unchurched	68%	30%	2%
Service to Persons in Need	26%	73%	1%
Action on Social Issues	28%	69%	3%
Ministry to Sick, Shut-ins	32%	66%	2%
Pastoral Counseling	23%	74%	3%
Fellowship Opportunities	24%	74%	3%
Supporting Ethnic Heritage	11%	83%	7%
Promoting Stewardship	36%	61%	3%
Supporting World Missions	21%	74%	5%

Congregations engage in a number of tasks whether tied to a specific program area or not. Board or council members were asked to provide an assessment of their congregation's performance on various tasks. Table 4.3.1 contains the responses. The general level of satisfaction was highest for both traditional and contemporary worship opportunities and support for members' ethnic heritage. Also receiving high marks (60 percent or more generally satisfied) were pastoral counseling, fellowship opportunities, service to people in need, adult Christian education, encouraging members to act on



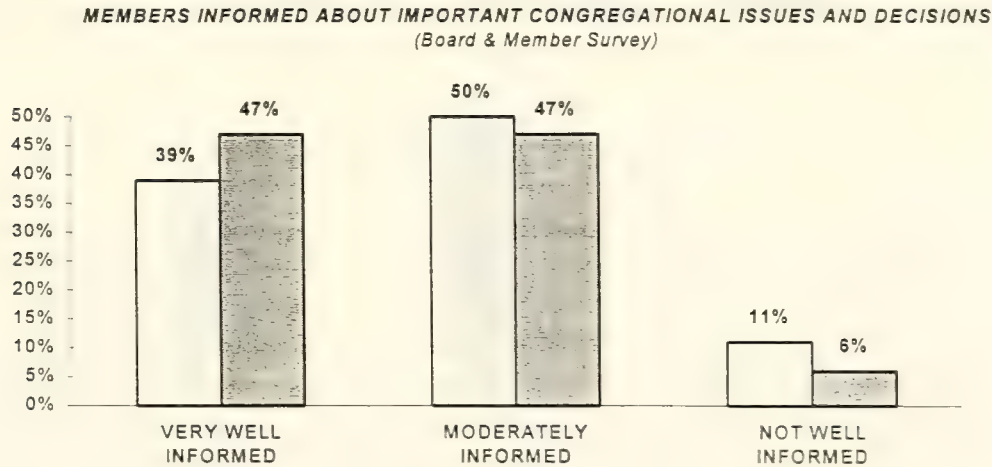
social and political issues, caring ministry to sick and bereaved and encouraging Christian stewardship. Tasks seen as needing more emphasis by at least 40 percent of the respondents are sharing the Gospel with the unchurched, Christian education for children and youth, and helping members deepen their spiritual relationship with God.



(Figure 4.3.2)

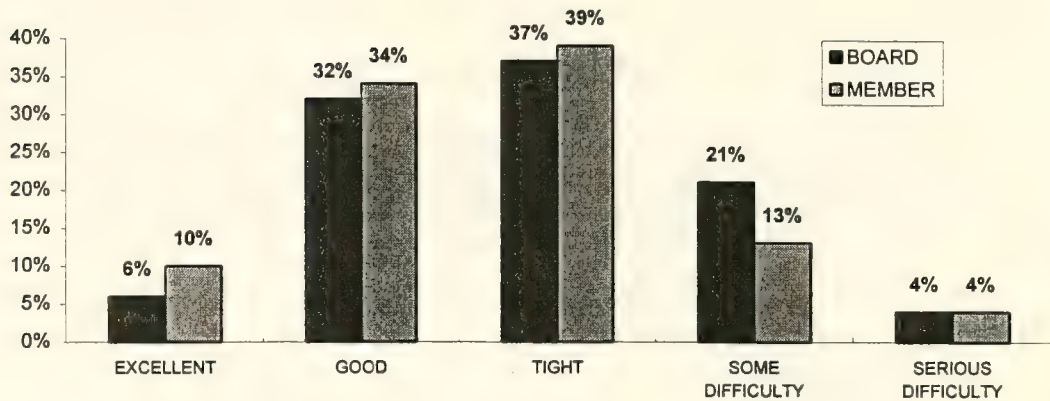
When board and council members rate the tasks their congregation does best, two stand out over the rest: Providing worship that uses traditional forms and providing aid and service to those in need. Providing a caring ministry to sick, shut-ins and bereaved is third.

4.4 General Assessments of Congregational Functioning and Morale



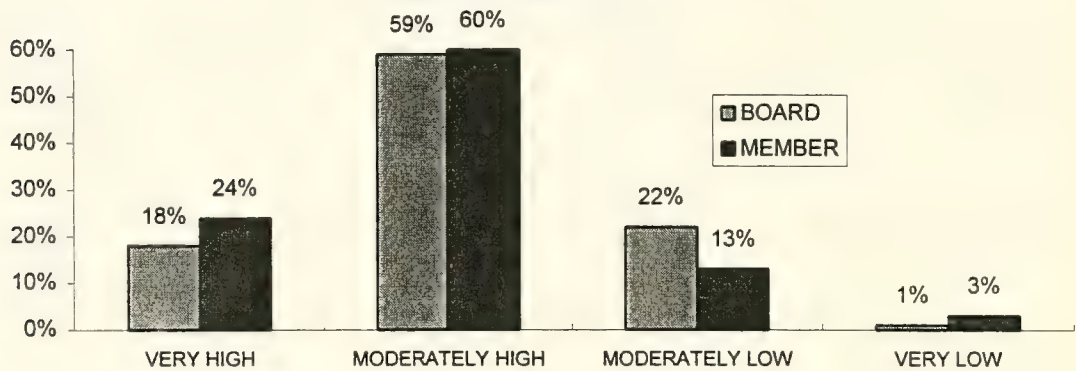
(Figure 4.4.1)

**FINANCIAL HEALTH OF THE CONGREGATION**  
(Board & Member Survey)



(Figure 4.4.2)

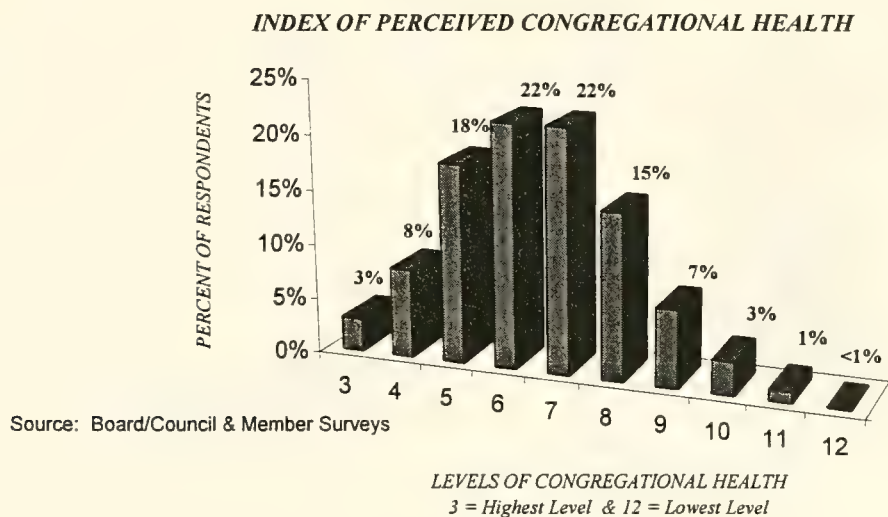
**CURRENT MORALE OF THE CONGREGATION**  
(Board & Member Survey)



(Figure 4.4.3)

Figure 4.4.1-4.4.3 show responses of the board/council members and general lay members to three measures asking about various aspects of the condition of the congregations: how well members are informed about congregational issues and decisions, the congregation's financial health and, current morale. In each case, the typical response is the middle or moderate response category. Respondents believe that most members are moderately well-informed about congregational issues and decisions; they believe that their congregation's financial health is tight but adequate; and they assess the current morale as moderately high. The figures also show that board and

council members have a slightly less positive view of the three measures than do the general members who responded.



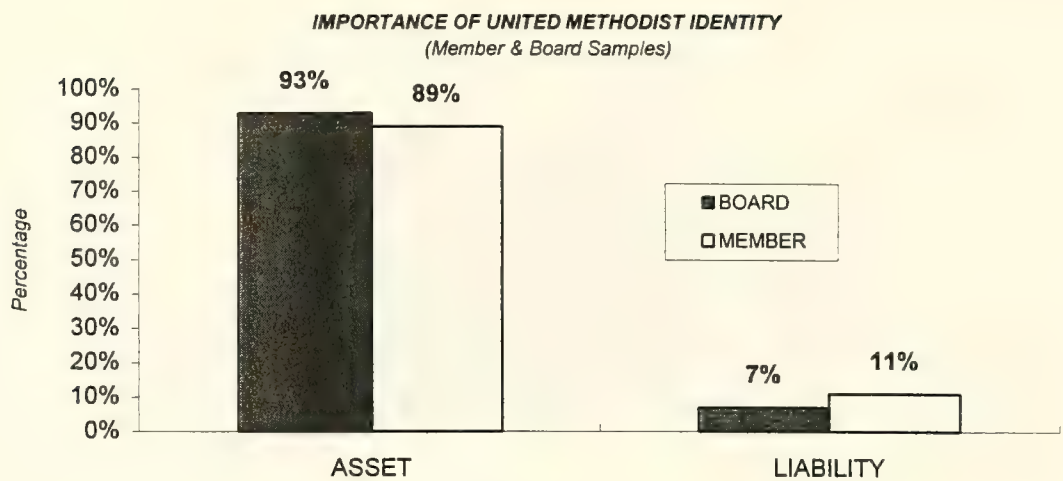
**(Figure 4.4.4)**

When we combine all respondents' (board and members) scores on these three items (openness of communication, financial health and morale), we get what might be thought of as an index of congregational "health."<sup>10</sup> The resulting can range between three (highest "health") and twelve (lowest "health"). The average congregational "health" score is 6.37 (the majority cluster around a score of six). While members are realistic in seeing some problems in their congregation's life, they are slightly more positive than negative.

<sup>10</sup>We do not suggest that the scores on these three items constitute an adequate answer to the Duke Endowment's original question about what makes a viable congregation; however, we do believe (from considerable experience of using these items in other studies of congregations) that they tell us something important about how members feel about their congregation and its health.

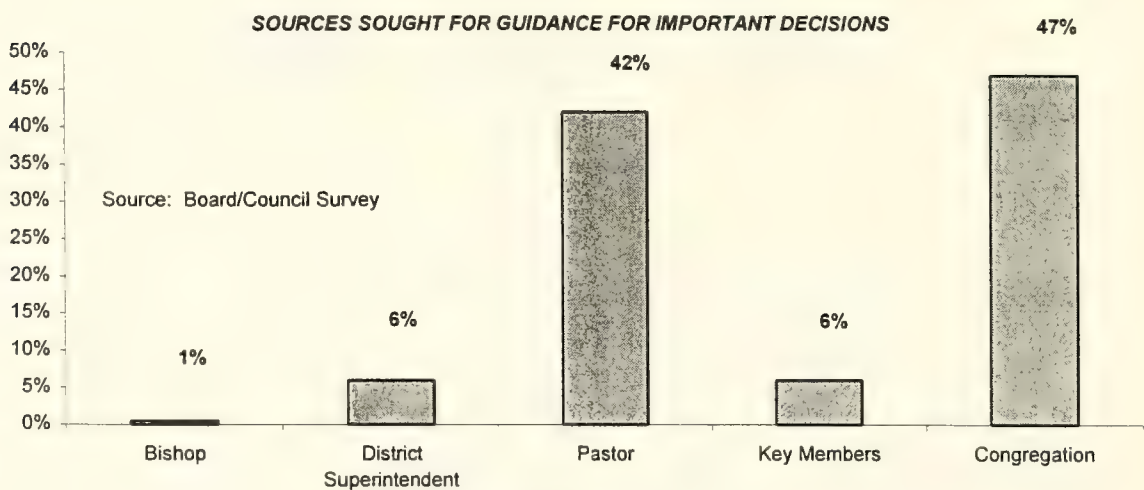


4.5 United Methodist Identity and Relationship



(Figure 4.5.1)

A number of recent authors have commented on the declining significance of denominationalism to American laity. Although the meaning of denominational affiliation is a complex issue and open to various interpretations, we asked board/council members and general lay members of the sample churches about the importance to them of their congregation’s United Methodist identity. An overwhelming majority of both groups believe being United Methodist is an asset to their congregation; though members were very slightly more likely to say that Methodist identity was a liability. Men were slightly more likely to see it as a liability than women. There were no statistically significant differences along age or racial-ethnic lines (tables not shown).



(Figure 4.5.2)

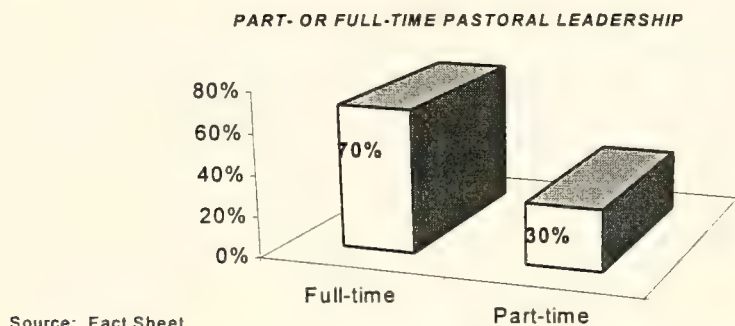
Also to some extent indicating the importance of United Methodist ties, especially being part of the connectional system, we asked board/council members who they would be likely to ask for assistance if they faced an important congregational decision. Although the source looked to for help will obviously vary with the type of decision, we nevertheless posed the question generally. Figure 4.5.2 shows the responses of congregational leaders. Most, it is clear, would not turn to the bishop or district superintendent. They would look instead for help from the congregation as a whole or the pastor.

## 5. PASTORAL LEADERSHIP

Issues relating to pastoral leadership are critical ones for small membership congregations. They include the types of leadership that small churches typically have, whether that leadership is full- or part-time, the pastor's tenure, the costs of leadership to the congregations, whether the congregation receives equitable salary assistance from the annual conference, the pastor's gender and congregational preference for various patterns of pastoral leadership. This section examines these important issues.

### 5.1 Types of Leadership

Thirty-eight percent of the pastors of our sample churches are full members of the annual conference. Another 13 percent are probationary members (persons who will receive full membership in the annual conference upon successful completion of their probationary period. Twenty-six percent are full- or part-time local pastors (that is, persons who do not have a seminary degree and who are not ordained, but who have been authorized by the bishop to perform the duties of a pastor in a specific local church.) The remaining 24 percent of the churches are variously served by associate members of the annual conferences, by retired pastors, or by "other" arrangements (tables not shown).

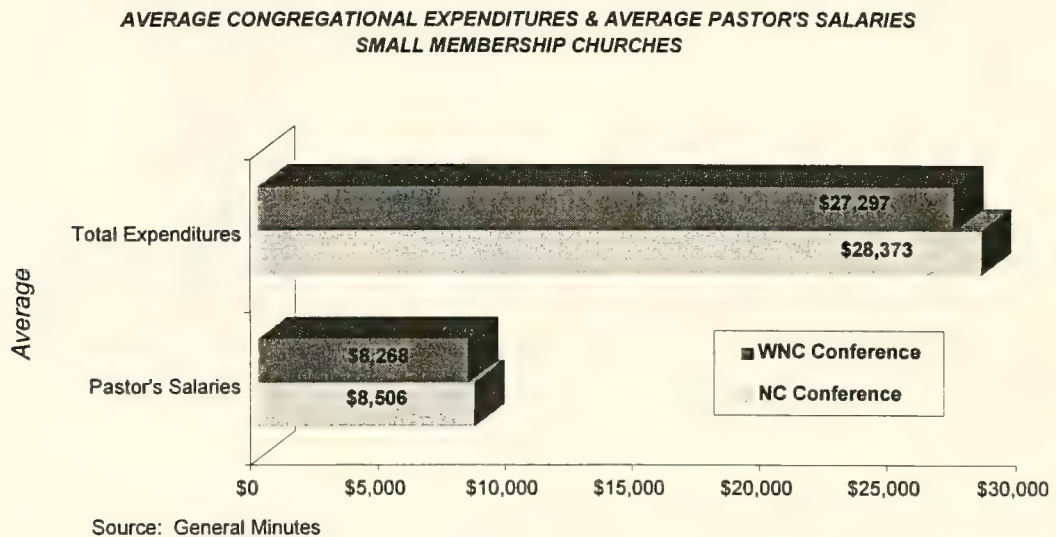


(Figure 5.1.1)

Seventy percent of the congregations in our sample are served by pastors who are full-time in the congregation or charge. Thirty percent are part-time. The average number of hours spent in pastoral work in the congregation or charge is 41. Part-time pastors average 27 hours a week in pastoral work, while full-time pastors average 48

hours. Those who are part-time spend an average of 35 hours a week in their other (non-pastoral) occupations.

## 5.2 Costs of Pastoral Leadership to the Congregations



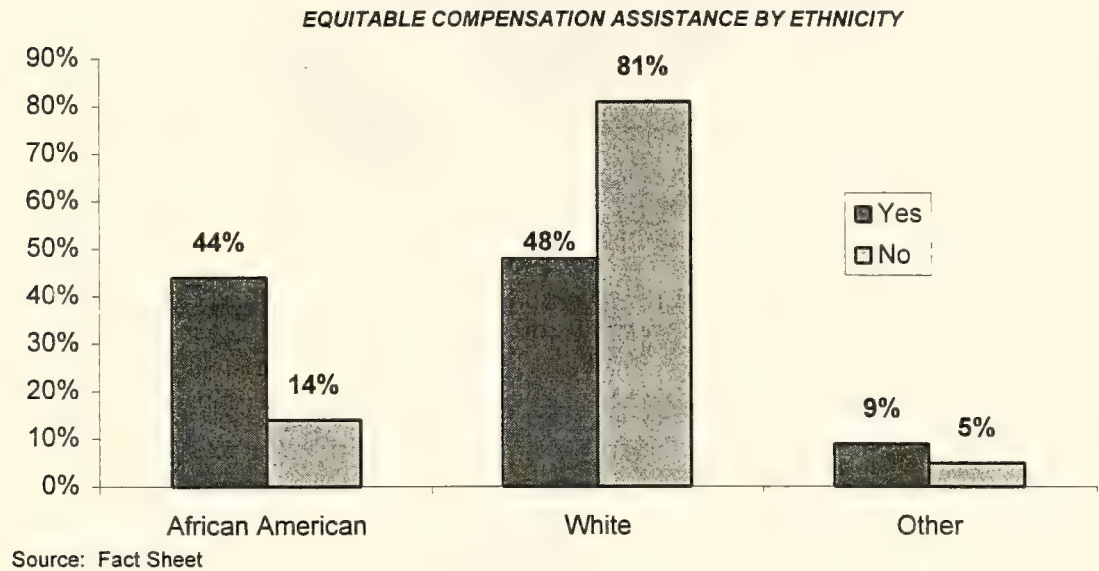
(Figure 5.2.1)

Small membership congregations' average spending for all purposes is shown for the two annual conferences along with their average expenditures for pastors' salaries. The salary figures do not include housing (either parsonage or a housing allowance) or various other fringe benefits such as travel, health care, pensions, etc. In both annual conferences, the amount spent for pastoral salaries is approximately 33 percent of total expenditures. Although we did not calculate the amount paid for housing and other benefits, a 1988 study found that housing and benefits for Methodist clergy added approximately 69 percent to the cash salary paid the pastor.<sup>11</sup> If the average cash salaries of the small membership churches in the two conferences are multiplied by this figure and the result is used to compute the percent of total expenditures paid for all forms of pastoral compensation, then the average small membership congregation spends about 51 percent of its total expenditures for pastoral support. When one considers that providing for pastoral leadership is often the primary "program" expenditure of many small membership churches, then spending roughly 51 percent for pastoral support does not seem unduly high.

<sup>11</sup> *Leadership, Cost and Effectiveness in Four Denominations*. (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988), pp. 45-55. The estimates used here were as carefully done as possible to represent all sources of non-salary income and benefits. They should nevertheless be taken as only approximate but helpful in assessing costs of clergy leadership.



Eighty-one percent of the congregations reported receiving no equitable compensation assistance from the annual conference (salary supplements to bring the pastor's salary up to a conference designated minimum.) Of the 19 percent that do receive such assistance, the average amount received is \$1,090. The minimum amount reported by one congregation was \$25; the maximum, also reported by one congregation, was \$4,400.<sup>12</sup> Of those receiving equitable compensation assistance, 78 percent are full-time pastors.

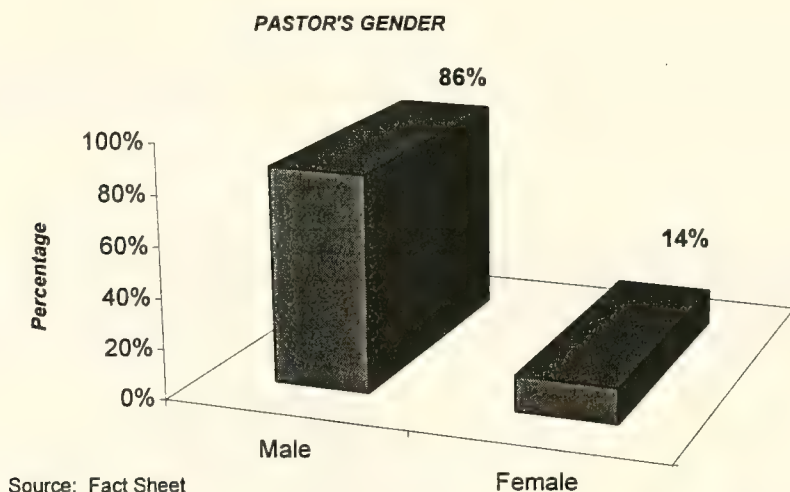


(Figure 5.2.2)

Among our sample congregations, 48 percent of those that report receiving equitable compensation assistance are predominantly white, and 44 percent are African American. Only one congregation each among the Native American and Asian American congregations in our sample report receiving equitable compensation assistance. We have included them in the graph as “Other.”

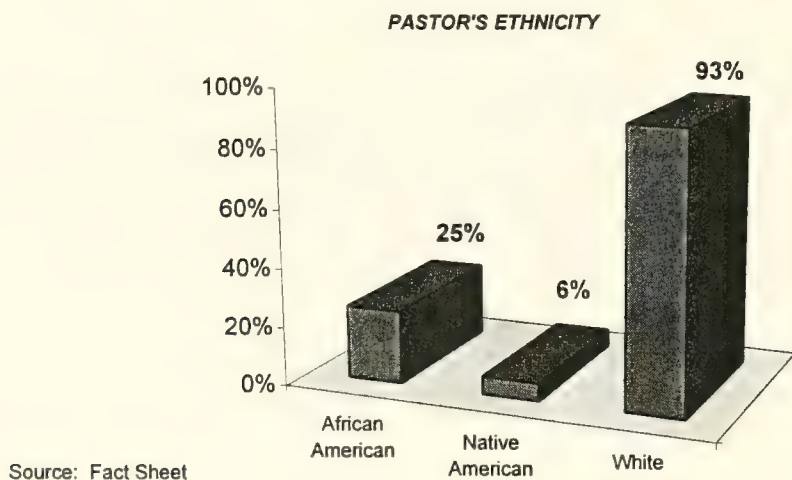
<sup>12</sup>These are self-reported figures by the pastor or person completing the fact sheet, thus we are not entirely sure of their accuracy. The low of \$25, however, could be the amount received by this particular congregation as its pro-rata share of the total equitable compensation assistance paid to the entire charge.

### 5.3 Personal Characteristics of the Pastors of Small Membership Congregations



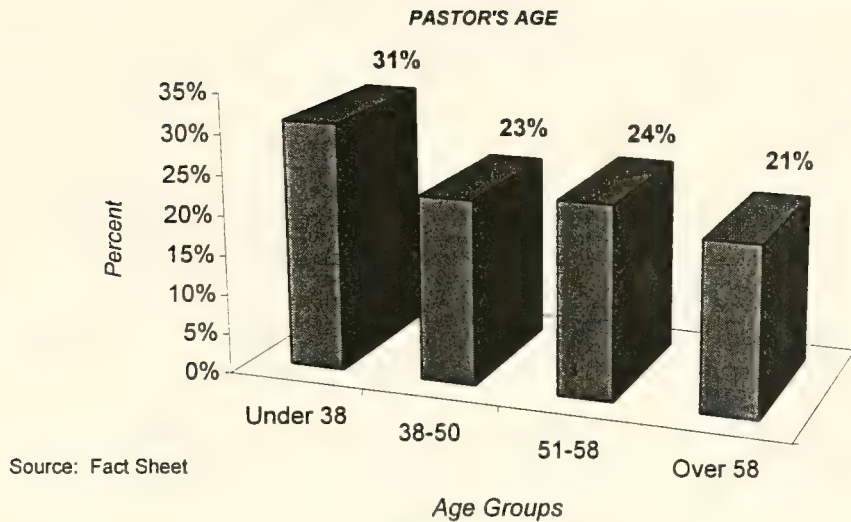
(Figure 5.3.1)

Eighty-six percent of the congregations that we surveyed were being served by male pastors. Clergy women are in 14 percent of the churches. Twenty-seven percent of the congregations reported that they are now or have been served by women pastors.



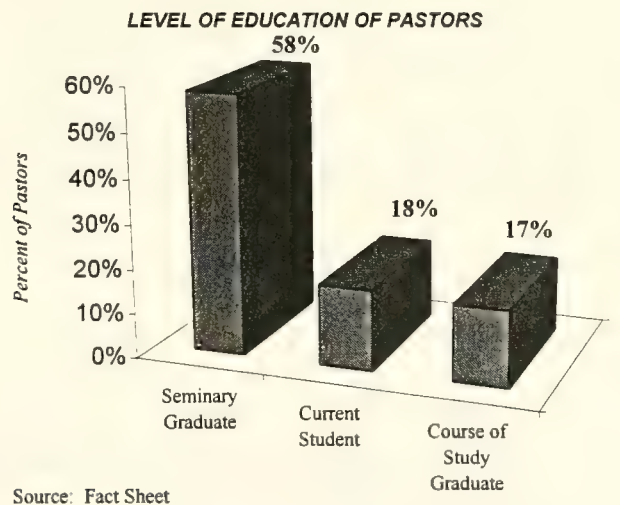
(Figure 5.3.2)

Of the churches surveyed, 20 percent of their pastors are African Americans, 5 percent Native Americans and 75 percent white.



**(Figure 5.3.3)**

The bar graph shows the age of pastors broken down by various age groups. The majority are in the youngest age group--under 38, with the youngest being age 20. The average age is 47.

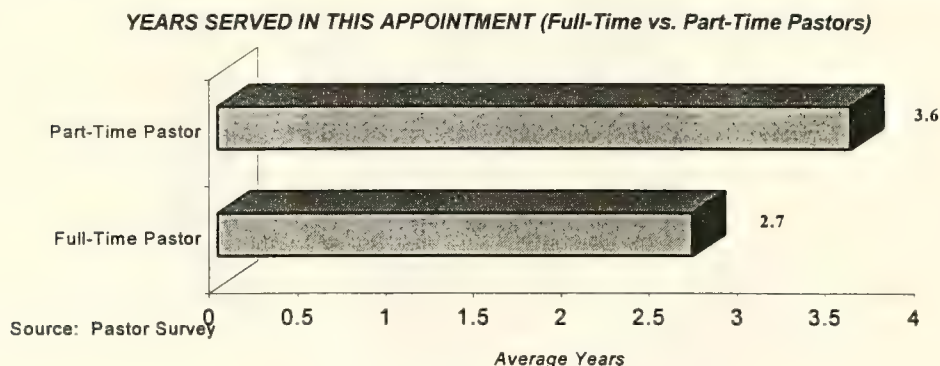


**(Figure 5.3.4)**

Fifty-eight percent of the pastors of the sample congregations are graduates of a seminary; another 18 percent are current students; and 17 percent are graduates of the Course of Study for Associate Members of the Annual Conference.



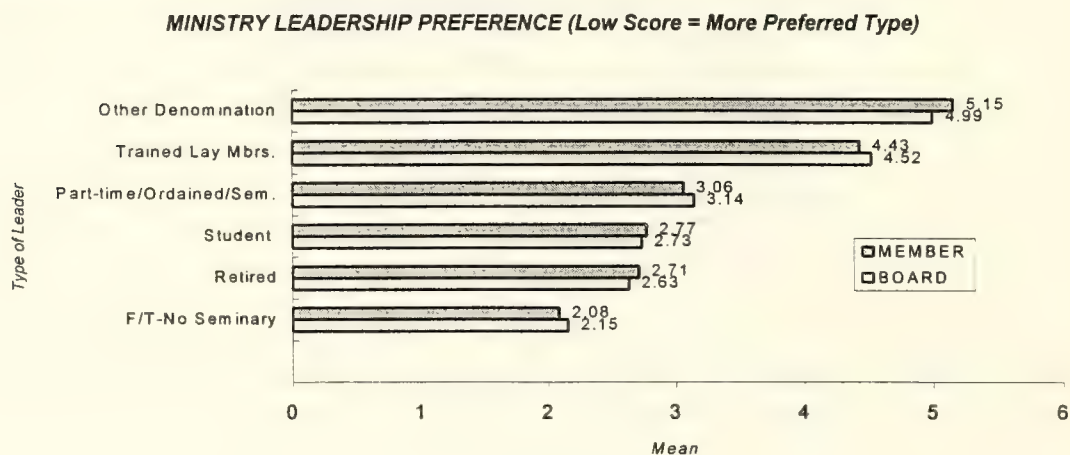
The majority of pastors of the survey congregations (60 percent) report that they were raised as United Methodists or one of its predecessor denominations. Of those not raised as United Methodists, the largest percentage (13 percent) were raised as Baptists.



(Figure 5.3.6)

Length of pastoral tenure is a critical issue for all churches, including small membership churches. Some believe that a pastoral tenure of at least seven years is necessary for fostering significant pastoral relationships and providing the sustained leadership necessary for developing and implementing effective programs. One estimate for United Methodist churches is that the average pastoral tenure is 2.5 years, obviously considerably less than the desired seven-plus years. In our sample churches, pastors had served an average of three years in their current charge. *When this was broken down between full and part-time pastors, the average tenure of full-time pastors was 2.7 years and that of part-time was 3.6 years. The median number of years served for both full- and part-time pastors was two. The longest serving full-time pastor had served eleven years; the longest serving part-time pastor had served twenty-eight years.*

## 5.4 Member and Board Preferences for Pastoral Leadership



(Figure 5.4.1)

If the congregation or pastoral charge faced a decline in finances, or if a full-time, seminary educated ordained pastor were not available for appointment to the church or charge, what kind of ministry leadership would the board and members prefer? Board members and general members were asked to rank several options from one to six in order of preference, with one being the highest preference. Figure 5.4.1 shows the preferences. The rankings are identical and the differences in average (mean) scores between the two groups are not statistically significant. Several things are clear from the rankings. If a full-time, seminary trained pastor is not available to the congregation, then:

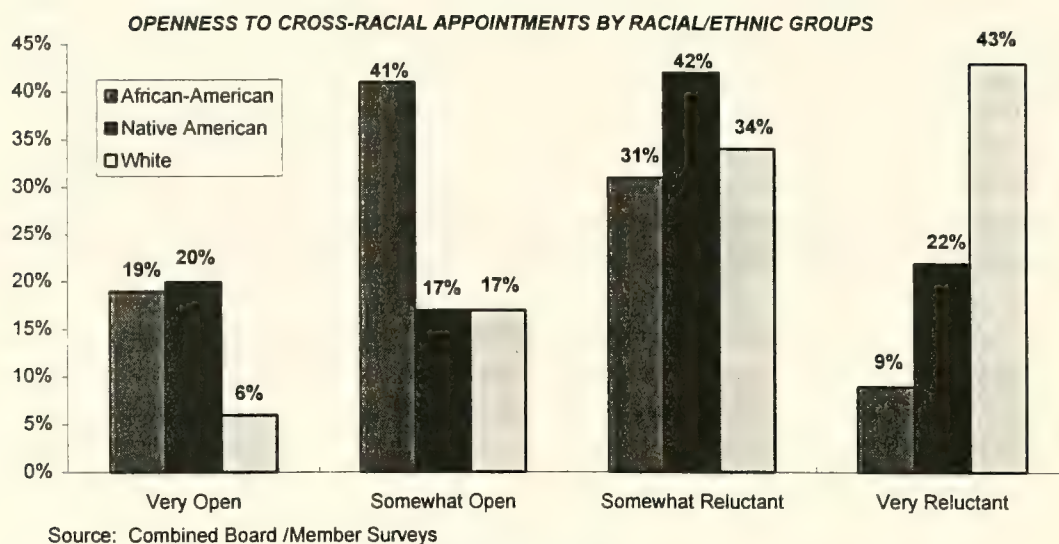
- A full-time pastor without a seminary degree (Associate Member of the Annual Conference) is preferred to all other choices.
- Not-too-distant second and third preferences are for a retired pastor or a student pastor, in that order.
- So called “tent-making”<sup>13</sup> styles of ministry (a seminary trained pastor who serves part-time in the congregation or charge while working part- or full-time in another occupation) is the fourth preference.
- At some distance from the others are the fifth and six preferences--lay persons trained to fulfill most or all pastoral roles who work on a part-time basis (Local Pastors), and pastors from other denominations.

In short, although, from the standpoint of the denomination, tent-making ministries or the use of Local Pastors might be the most feasible solutions to meeting the ministry needs of small membership congregations, both lay leaders and members rate such patterns fairly low in terms of preference.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>So named after the Apostle Paul's practice of supporting his ministry by working as a tent-maker.

<sup>14</sup>A similar pattern of preferences was found in a national study of United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Catholic congregations or parishes. While the question wording was slightly different, the lack of enthusiasm for tent-making and lay pastors was similar. See Hoge, Carroll and Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership*, pp. 103-5.

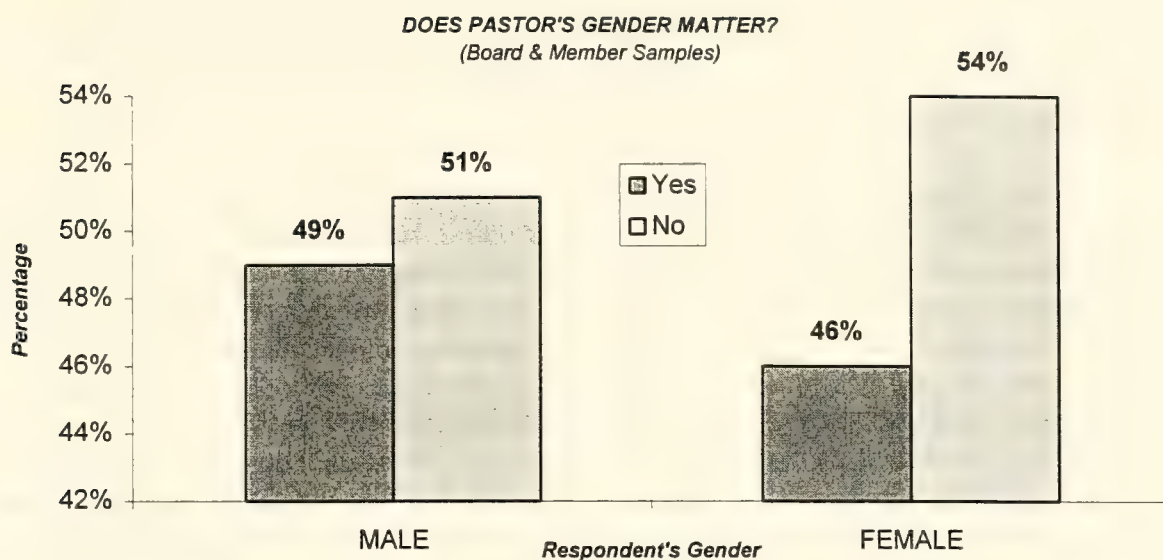


**(Figure 5.4.2)**

A major issue facing the denomination, especially in the Southeast, is openness to cross-racial appointments. Figure 5.4.2 shows the combined responses of leaders and members of the sample congregations<sup>15</sup> to a question asking about their perceptions of the openness of their congregation to a cross-racial appointment, that is, of a pastor of a different racial or ethnic group than that of the majority of the congregation. Although we had a relatively low number of responses from African American and Native American laity, we have broken the responses in the figure by these three racial/ethnic groups. African Americans believe that their congregations are much more open to cross-racial appointments than white or Native American laity, though Native Americans are somewhat more open than whites. Sixty-one percent of African American laity believe that their congregation would be “very” or “somewhat open” to a cross-racial appointment, while 77 percent of whites believe that their congregation would be “somewhat” or “very reluctant” to accept such an appointment.

<sup>15</sup>There was no statistically significant difference between leaders and members on this question.





(Figure 5.4.3)

This figure reports the responses to a question asking lay leaders and members if the gender of their pastor matters. While males are slightly more likely to say that gender matters, the differences between their responses and that of lay women are not statistically significant. Just over half of all lay women and men say that gender does not matter. When we compared responses by the respondents racial/ethnic group, African Americans were somewhat more likely to say that gender does not matter (63 percent as compared with 52 percent of Native Americans and whites--table not shown). For those who say that the pastor's gender *does* matter, the large majority (almost 99 percent) prefer a male pastor (table not shown).

## 6. Congregational Growth and Decline

In various places we have referred to the growth or decline in attendance, church membership and church school attendance. In most cases, this has involved noting what is *not* significantly related to growth or decline--for example, there was no relation between the church's location (city, town or rural) and growth or decline, and we found only a very weak relationship between membership growth and population growth. We also found no relationship between having outreach or evangelistic programs and growth or decline. The same was true for having a full- or part-time pastor, for length of pastor's tenure and congregational morale. We are not suggesting that these and other variables may not be important for growth or decline--only that they did not prove to be so for these congregations. It may be that so few of them grew during the period we studied that there was too little variance to explain.

We tried, nevertheless, to see if there are other factors that affect growth or decline. We examined the relationship between attendance change between 1983 and 1993 and a number of other variables that might be associated with growth. The strongest relationships were as follows: the presence of a greater percentage of persons from non-United Methodist backgrounds

in the congregation's membership (as estimated by the pastors); greater percentages of congregational members between 35 and 54 years of age; receiving equitable compensation assistance from the annual conference; and the absence of serious congregational conflict in the past two to three years.<sup>16</sup>

Although most of these the factors affecting growth seem intuitively right, we were somewhat surprised by the finding that growth was greater in congregations that have a higher percentage of members who are not from United Methodist backgrounds. We included it in the analysis along with several other items about membership characteristics, none of which proved significant. How to explain the significance of the presence of non-Methodists? Though we can only conjecture, their presence probably reflects congregations that make a conscious effort to invite others into their fellowship. Almost two-thirds of the members and leaders are life-long Methodists and have been members of their present congregation an average of 39 years. Even those who belonged to another denomination before becoming Methodists reported having been members of their congregations for an average of 25 years. For all members and leaders, the average length of membership in their congregations was 34 years, with the longest being 85 years.

In addition to these stronger relationships, the percentage of population change from 1980 to 1990 was weakly related to attendance growth and, as previously noted, to membership growth. Also, having a larger percentage of members who are ages 55 to 74 was negatively related to attendance growth. When this is seen in connection with the positive effect of greater percentages of those between ages 34 and 54, we gain further insight into growth and decline dynamics. Recall that the dominant age group in the general population of the congregations is the age 34-54 segment while the dominant age group in the congregations is the 55 and older segment. There is, therefore, something of a mismatch between the dominant age group in most small membership congregations and the dominant age group in their surrounding communities. Where there are significant numbers of younger members (especially in the 34-54 group), there is a greater likelihood of growth.

There is a sense in which we should not be surprised that most of these small membership churches have not grown. As we noted previously, many members value the small size and the more intimate and supportive fellowship that small size offers--which is also why many large congregations develop small groups to meet these needs. Thus members sometimes resist efforts to grow, albeit not always consciously. At the same time, however, *the lack of growth (whether intentional or not) is obviously problematic, if for no other reason than that, without growth, most of these congregations will not long survive, and the positive attributes that members find in them will be lost to succeeding generations. More important, however, is what the lack of growth in settings where the surrounding population is growing says about the congregations' general lack of commitment to evangelism. There is simply not much clear evidence in our data*

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<sup>16</sup>These variables explained 21 percent of the variance in a multiple regression analysis--not a robust model, but nevertheless all that could be achieved. The particular regression model was selected after computing a large number of theoretically likely explanatory variables and selecting only those that were statistically significant to enter into the regression model.



*to suggest that many of these congregations have much enthusiasm for outreach to newcomers, whether churched or unchurched!*

## **SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

To try to summarize this report in any fashion would not only be difficult but redundant. We will, however, indicate some observations about small membership churches that our analysis has suggested.

### **General Issues**

- North Carolina Methodism, like United Methodism as a whole, is a small membership church denomination. Although the majority of the members are in large congregations, the overwhelming number of churches are small. Such congregations should be appreciated for their unique contributions to the ministry and mission of the church and not judged by inappropriate criteria. They need the support and resources of the denomination equally as much as large. At the same time, we should not romanticize small congregations. Many are in trouble with aging memberships, lack of outreach to their communities, and limited resources. They are a contributor, though not the only one, to the denomination's overall membership declines of the past thirty years.
- Despite their problems, members of small membership churches value them for the sense of meaning and belonging that they experience in these congregations, and they support them with their participation and dollars. They probably do so to a greater extent per member than is true in larger congregations where it is easier to "free ride."
- The majority of small membership congregations in North Carolina are in rural areas. Not only have many formerly rural areas become urban (or exurban) in recent years as cities have spilled over into the countryside, but the remaining rural areas are considerably different in character from the days when large or small family farms were dominant. That we only could count five percent of the 1200 plus respondents to our survey whose primary occupation is farming is a sign of the shift to corporate farming that is taking place. Yet this shift has not meant population decline for most of the rural (or city and town) areas in which our sample churches are located. Most are growing, though not with farm families but with many urban workers and retirees who prefer to live in rural areas and small towns. Churches in these areas can capitalize on this growth. Our study suggests, however, that many are not doing so. On the one hand, we found many congregational leaders--mostly pastors who answered our Fact Sheet survey--who viewed most of the community changes we asked about as having a negative impact on their churches. In some cases at least, we strongly suspect that they are misreading the situation, not seeing in these changes opportunities for the churches to engage in ministry and mission. And we also suspect that some of the lack of growth that we found,



especially in congregations located in growing ZIP code areas, is a function of a mostly unconscious resistance to and fear of the changes that growth might bring. This puts small congregations in a kind of “catch 22” situation: if they actively seek new members and grow, they risk losing some of the intimacy and family-like character of these churches that many value. If, however, they resist growth, most of them will continue to decline and possibly die, given the increasingly older age of the members.

- We also noted that there is often a mismatch between the kinds of people moving into formerly rural and small town areas and the congregations’ members. We saw this to be the case with reference to age, but we also suspect it may be true in terms of other social and economic characteristics as well. This sometimes leads to a feeling by members and newcomers alike that the others aren’t “our kind of people.” To break through this impasse requires leadership from both pastors and laity. Pastors are needed who have skills in congregational and community analysis and in leading congregations through change. Such skills involve honoring the positive values that are so appreciated by many members of small churches, but they also involve the ability to help congregations envision new possibilities for faithful and effective ministry that will take them beyond mere survival. Such pastors can be helped when there are laity who have had experiences in other congregations and settings and who are able to encourage long time members to risk change. Many retirees who are settling in small town and rural areas and who match existing congregational members in age are often able to fulfill this catalytic function in the congregations they join.
- We believe that the two conferences should assume a proactive role in facilitating the kind of change processes that will help some of these small membership congregations to respond creatively to their changing communities. This might involve a strategy that, in broad strokes, would include careful identification of congregations that have both the potential and the will to change to meet the needs of their changing communities; providing training for both their pastors and lay leaders in congregational and community analysis, coupled with theological reflection on how they want their congregations to change and develop; and offering ongoing consultative and program support in various areas of congregational life and development. Such a strategy must also include a commitment to longer tenured pastorates. We believe that such steps as these, though perhaps less dramatic in their immediate effects and arguably more costly than starting new congregations,<sup>17</sup> can enrich the life and vitality of many--not all--small membership congregations without necessarily losing the best of what their members have come to value.
- All small congregations, regardless of their possibilities for growth, have the potential of serving their communities in ways that bear witness to the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. A number of these congregations are already doing this: recall that this was one of the several tasks of the church that the largest number of leaders (22 percent) felt that

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<sup>17</sup>See Lyle E. Schaller, *Tattered Trust*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 75

their congregation was doing best. At the same time, however, the opportunities for such service are great and increasing, especially as many federally funded programs are being cut and their work shifted to the private and voluntary sectors. These opportunities include day care for children of working parents, adult day care for older adults who require such attention, food pantries and clothing cupboards, programs for homeless persons and so forth. Even where small congregations do not have the person-power or financial resources to undertake such programs, they often have facilities that can be used for these ministries. It was encouraging to see how many congregations are already allowing community groups to use their buildings. Hopefully this includes such programs as those mentioned.

- We would urge the annual conferences to both encourage and support such efforts by all churches, but especially by small membership churches which are often located in areas where the ending of government programs will hit hardest. It would not be surprising to find that congregations that respond to these new challenges will find a renewed sense of purpose and hope that will contribute to their own revitalization..

### **Leadership Issues**

Leadership issues are among the most critical matters facing small membership churches and the denomination. They include such questions as the kind of pastoral leaders these churches need; whether they are full- or part-time; ordained or lay pastors; the crucial issue of tenure of pastoral appointment; matters of pastoral support; and cross-racial appointments. We cannot comment on all of these, but several deserve special mention.

- First, to reiterate, leaders of small membership churches--whether ordained or lay, full- or part-time--need training in the areas of congregational and community analysis, assessment of the needs and opportunities for ministry, and skills in developing and implementing a vision for ministry. There are no magic formulae for undertaking these tasks that are appropriate for all congregations. What is appropriate for a large congregation is not necessarily so for a small membership church. We need leaders who can understand the particular and unique dynamics of their own congregation and community and lead their congregations in envisioning and implementing ministries appropriate to their congregation, its size and place. The Duke Endowment's support of Duke Divinity School's field education program is already making a major contribution to the education of seminary students in understanding the dynamics of rural church ministry that is unique among theological schools of all denominations, but there is also a great opportunity for continuing theological education of pastors and lay leaders in the kinds of leadership skills that we have noted.
- A second issue is the type of pastoral leadership needed for small membership congregations. Many denominational officials and consultants with small churches



believe that “tent-making” or bi-vocational ministries should be widely used in small congregations. Others also recommend the use of indigenous lay leaders (singly or in teams) who have been appropriately trained for their pastoral tasks. In either case, the argument is made that small churches can neither afford full-time, seminary trained, ordained leaders--especially as solo pastors--nor do they really require full-time leadership. Lyle Schaller, for example, has argued that it requires a congregation with an average worship attendance of at least 120 to support a full-time, ordained pastor of its own.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, this criterion leaves out all of the churches we have included in our study and a large additional number in the two conferences as well that have fewer than 120 attenders. As we saw, the two recommended options--tent-makers and trained laity (especially the latter)--are not widely understood or favored by lay members. They much prefer a full-time, ordained pastor (seminary trained or not). Although they would prefer their own full-time pastor, they are willing to share that person with one or more churches so long as he or she is full-time. Failing that, their next option is for retired or a seminary student. An earlier cross-denominational study found that laity would not reject the tent-maker option as strongly if the pastor’s other occupation is in some clearly identified church-related occupation--e.g., as a pastoral counselor, denominational staff person. Having a pastor who also engages in a “secular” occupation was resisted, as was also the use of trained laity.<sup>19</sup> Thus there are conflicting strategies and expectations between small church consultants and lay members of the churches. From our perspective, it clearly makes sense for many of the small membership churches that we studied to be served by tent-makers or by trained local pastors; yet, if this is to happen, a careful educational and consultative process is needed with the congregations that will help them understand the options and allow their leaders to make input into the decision.

- Another possibility, often used in connection with the use of tent-makers and especially local pastors, is the strategy of developing cooperative ministries in lieu of creating pastoral charges. We were surprised to find so few instances of involvement in cooperative ministries among our sample churches. Such ministries, when carefully developed from the ground up rather than imposed from the top down, can be exciting and effective ways of providing leadership and quality ministries for small (and mid-sized) congregations, using both full-time and part-time pastors who covenant to work together along with the cooperating congregations. The Hinton Rural Life Center is a valuable resource in our region for the development of such ministries.
- Any strategy, whether of targeting particular small membership congregations for redevelopment efforts or initiating cooperative parishes, will not likely succeed unless we can address the pastoral tenure problem. It is simply unrealistic to think that either of these (or other) strategies to revitalize small membership congregations will succeed

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<sup>18</sup>“UMC: What’s the Future of the Small-Church Denomination?” *Circuit Rider* 11 (December-January, 1987): 8-10.

<sup>19</sup>Hoge, Carroll and Scheets, *Patterns of Parish Leadership*, pp. 104-5.



when there is constant pastoral turnover. Use of part-time or local pastors will help: Our data showed that local pastors had somewhat longer average tenure (but not by much!) than fully credentialed pastors. Finding ways to support and reward fully ordained pastors who commit to long-term service in a small membership church will be important in sustaining their commitment.

- Many conference leaders and consultants with small membership churches express a desire to end equitable salary support for these churches. In many cases, this seems a desirable step. Such assistance not only competes with other priorities for scarce conference resources, but some studies have found salary subsidies to be counterproductive, often creating both dependency and resentment on the part of subsidized congregations and resulting in little positive gain.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, there are strategic reasons for offering equitable salary assistance to some congregations--e.g., start-up assistance for new congregations or for older congregations that show potential for redevelopment (The weak but positive relationship between growth and receiving equitable salary support is an example), or for other special circumstances--but as a general rule, subsidies seem to be unproductive at best and counterproductive at worst.
- Finally, we simply call attention again to our findings regarding openness to cross-racial appointments. This is an issue that extends beyond small membership congregations, but our findings provide some insight. Resistance to cross-racial appointments persists, especially in white congregations, though not as much as we anticipated. African American congregations were more open to accepting pastors of another racial or ethnic group. Such appointments are controversial, not only because of persisting racism, but also because of cultural differences in congregations of different racial or ethnic groups. On one hand, racism aside, we could argue that it is important for a congregation to be served by pastors who understand and appreciate the distinctive cultural traditions of that congregation, including especially its racial or ethnic heritage. On the other hand, we can also argue that cross-racial appointments should be pursued vigorously, both as a witness to the inclusiveness of the Gospel and for the long-term health of both congregations and clergy.<sup>21</sup> There is no simple solution to these conflicting pressures for and against cross-racial appointments, but it is an issue that demands attention in churches of all sizes. Our preference is for pursuing such appointments, but doing so selectively with considerable consultation with pastors and congregations and involving only those pastors who are sensitive to cross-cultural differences.

These are a few of the conclusions that we draw from our study. Readers will draw others for themselves. We are still, however, left with the difficult question with which we

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<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Charles R. Wilson, "St. Swithen's Swamped: The Story of a Pastoral Church." *Interchange* 6 (Winter 1988): 2-4.

<sup>21</sup>With reference to clergy, for example, some African American pastors have found their mobility severely limited by the relatively small number of predominantly African-American congregations to which they can be appointed.

started: What constitutes a viable congregation? We continue to believe that this is at heart a theological question for congregations of all sizes. Furthermore, we believe that it must be answered congregation by congregation. We would frame the question to be asked in this way: *Is this congregation's gathered life and its ministry beyond its walls faithful to the Gospel, given the particularities of its size, resources and setting?* This question must be faced, not only by Duke Endowment or denominational officials, but also by pastors and lay members of large and small membership churches. We hope that our study has provided clues about the characteristics, issues and trends that can be used in framing and answering the question for small membership congregations.





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